

CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES OF KOREAN- AMERICAN ENGLISH TUTORS: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN THE INDONESIAN EFL CONTEXT

Feby Rudiazati Agrainy¹, Alfian Zuhairi²

^{1,2}*English Education Department, Universitas Islam Malang, Indonesia*

*Email:*¹22201073060@unisma.ac.id

Abstract: This study explores the challenges and adaptation strategies of Korean-American English tutors in the Indonesian EFL context. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with two tutors and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that the participants faced linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural challenges in teaching English. To address these challenges, they employed various adaptation strategies such as flexible teaching methods, structured classroom management, and culturally responsive practices. The study highlights the importance of pedagogical flexibility and cultural awareness in supporting effective English teaching in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Narrative inquiry, EFL teaching, teaching challenges, adaptation strategies, Korean-American tutors

INTRODUCTION

English tutors play an important role in supporting English language learning in EFL contexts by providing additional instructional support through more flexible and individualized learning interactions (Escobar, 2020). Unlike school-based teachers who follow formal curricula, tutors generally work in more flexible settings such as language courses or private learning environments. (Naibaho, 2019) This allows tutors to adapt their teaching practices based on learners' specific needs. (Dewi, 2025.)

In Indonesia, the increasing demand for English proficiency has contributed to the recruitment of foreign educators in various educational institutions (Kusmayanti, 2025). Among them, English tutors from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Korean-American tutors, bring different teaching perspectives and experiences into Indonesian classrooms. However, these differences also require tutors to adjust to new educational environments, learner characteristics, and cultural expectations.

Previous studies have shown that English tutors in EFL contexts often face various challenges related to students' language proficiency, motivation, participation, and communication styles (Sebayang et al., 2025). In addition, tutors from international

backgrounds may encounter cultural differences that require them to adapt to local educational norms and expectations (Mata & Espinosa, 2025). These conditions highlight the complexity of teaching in cross-cultural EFL settings.

Research also categorizes teaching challenges into linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural dimensions. Linguistic challenges include pronunciation difficulties and phonological transfer from the first language. Pedagogical challenges involve classroom management issues, low student participation, and large class sizes (Nazim et al., 2024) Meanwhile, sociocultural challenges arise from differences in learning expectations and interaction patterns between teachers and students (Poedjiastutie et al., 2021)

To respond to these challenges, tutors develop adaptation strategies such as modifying instructional methods, adjusting communication styles, and selecting appropriate learning materials based on students' needs (Suwartono et al., 2025) Although previous studies have examined English teaching in EFL contexts, most research focuses on formal school teachers rather than tutors working in non-formal settings (Bray, 2021) Studies on tutoring have mainly addressed professional identity and institutional expectations, while limited attention has been given to tutors' lived teaching experiences (Trent, 2016)

Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges experienced by Korean-American English tutors and the adaptation strategies they employ in the Indonesian EFL context using a narrative inquiry approach. By focusing on their lived experiences, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of cross-cultural tutoring practices in English language education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using Narrative Inquiry to explore the lived experiences of Korean-American English tutors in the Indonesian EFL context. Narrative inquiry was chosen because it focuses on participants' lived experiences and the stories they construct to make meaning of their teaching practices across time, place, and social interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The participants of this study were two Korean-American bilingual English tutors who were selected through purposive sampling. They were chosen based on their teaching experience in Indonesia and their ability to provide rich and detailed narratives related to teaching English in EFL contexts. Both participants have extensive exposure to English due to their educational background in the United States, with Participant 1 moving at the age of four and Participant 2 at the age of eleven. Their bilingual and cross-cultural backgrounds made them suitable for exploring teaching experiences in Indonesian educational settings. To maintain confidentiality, they are referred to as Participant 1 (P1) and Participant 2 (P2).

The primary data were collected through in-depth semi-structured narrative interviews conducted in English. The interviews allowed participants to freely share their teaching experiences, challenges, and adaptation strategies in a reflective and chronological manner. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes depending on participants' availability. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Follow-up communication was conducted when clarification was needed to deepen the understanding of participants' narratives.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the final report. This process resulted in three main themes: linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural challenges, along with adaptation strategies used by the participants. The interpretation of findings was also guided by the narrative inquiry framework, focusing on interaction, continuity, and situation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review their interview transcripts to confirm accuracy. Triangulation and thick description were also applied to enhance credibility and ensure that the findings accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba 1985)

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on interview data with two Korean-American English tutors (P1 and P2) in the Indonesian EFL context. The findings are organized into two main themes: challenges and adaptation strategies. The

findings reveal that both participants experienced three main challenges: linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural challenges during their teaching experiences in Indonesia.

Linguistic Challenges

Both participants identified pronunciation as the most dominant linguistic challenge. Students tended to apply Indonesian pronunciation patterns when speaking English, which affected their accuracy and fluency. P1 explained that students' pronunciation habits were already strongly established due to their first language. She stated:

"In their minds, it's already set. It's like cement." (P1)

This indicates that pronunciation difficulties are not only about knowledge, but also about deeply rooted speaking habits that are difficult to change. Students automatically pronounce English words using Indonesian sound systems, which makes correction a slow and continuous process. Similarly, P2 highlighted difficulties with English sounds that do not exist in Indonesian, especially final consonants:

"The ending sound is very challenging because in Indonesian you don't really pronounce it clearly." (P2)

This shows that students struggle with producing certain English phonemes, particularly at the end of words, which affects overall clarity in speaking. Overall, these findings suggest that linguistic challenges are mainly caused by first language interference and limited exposure to English pronunciation.

Pedagogical Challenges

Both participants experienced difficulties related to teaching methods, classroom management, and student participation. P1 explained that classroom interaction in Indonesia was different from what she was used to, especially in terms of student engagement:

"Students don't really engage unless you guide them step by step." (P1)

This shows that students tend to rely heavily on teacher direction, which limits spontaneous participation in class. She also emphasized that large class sizes made it difficult to give students enough speaking practice:

"In big classes, it's very hard to make students speak." (P1)

This indicates that limited speaking opportunities can reduce learning effectiveness, especially in language learning. P2 also highlighted that students often assume learning happens through listening rather than active practice:

“They think they learn when the teacher gives an explanation, but actually they need to practice.” (P2)

This suggests a gap between students’ perception of learning and effective language acquisition methods. In addition, he noted that students have different learning speeds, requiring flexible teaching approaches. Overall, pedagogical challenges require teachers to continuously adjust methods, manage classroom interaction, and encourage active participation.

Sociocultural Challenges

Sociocultural challenges were related to classroom culture, student confidence, and social pressure. P1 described Indonesian classrooms as teacher-centered:

“Here it’s very teacher-centered. Students wait for the teacher to talk.” (P1)

This indicates that students are more passive and less likely to speak without direct instruction from the teacher. She also mentioned that parents sometimes misunderstand communicative learning approaches:

“They think because students are just talking, it looks easy.” (P1)

This shows that speaking-based learning is sometimes undervalued because it appears less formal, even though it is pedagogically important.. P2 emphasized that students are often afraid of making mistakes:

“They are very afraid of making mistakes because they don’t want their friends to laugh at them.” (P2)

This fear reduces students’ confidence and willingness to participate in speaking activities. Overall, sociocultural factors such as classroom norms and fear of judgment strongly influence students’ participation in English learning. In response to these challenges, both participants developed several adaptation strategies.

Adaptation to Linguistic Challenges

In response to these challenges, both participants developed several adaptation strategies. Both participants used repetition, modeling, and gradual speaking practice to help students improve pronunciation. P1 explained that students should not be forced to speak individually at the beginning:

“First, they practice in groups, then in pairs, then individually.” (P1)

This shows a step-by-step approach designed to reduce anxiety and build confidence. P2 also emphasized the importance of patience and repetition:

*“I don’t mind repeating many times. If I rush them, they won’t speak.”
(P2)*

This indicates that language learning requires consistent exposure and repeated practice.

Adaptation to Pedagogical Challenges

P1 focused on structured classroom management and small group learning:

“If you don’t have classroom management, you cannot teach.” (P1)

She also highlighted the importance of small classes:

“Small classes work much better.” (P1)

This shows that controlling classroom structure helps improve participation and learning effectiveness. Meanwhile, P2 focused on flexibility in teaching methods:

“I have to adjust the pace depending on the students.” (P2)

This indicates that teaching should be adapted based on students’ understanding and learning needs.

Adaptation to Sociocultural Challenges

P1 emphasized the importance of building trust with students and respecting cultural differences:

“We have to build trust so they believe in our way of teaching.” (P1)

This shows that acceptance of teaching methods depends on relationships and credibility. P2 focused on creating a safe and comfortable classroom environment:

“If they feel comfortable, they will try to speak.” (P2)

This indicates that emotional safety plays a key role in encouraging student participation. The findings show that both participants experienced linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural challenges in teaching English in Indonesia. To overcome these challenges, they applied adaptation strategies such as step-by-step pronunciation practice, structured classroom management, flexible teaching methods, and building supportive relationships with students. These strategies helped improve students' confidence and participation in English learning.

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that linguistic challenges, particularly pronunciation difficulties, were the most prominent challenges experienced by both participants. As P1 described, learners' pronunciation habits were *"already set like cement,"* while P2 emphasized that learners found it difficult to pronounce English final consonants accurately. These findings indicate that learners' first language strongly influenced their English pronunciation and speaking performance. This finding is consistent with Kafabih et al., (2025) who reported that pronunciation remains one of the most common challenges in EFL learning because learners tend to transfer phonological features from their first language into English. Similarly, Shalabi, (2021) argued that limited exposure to authentic English outside the classroom restricts learners' pronunciation development and speaking ability. However, unlike previous studies that mainly focus on learners' linguistic competence, the present study demonstrates that pronunciation difficulties were also shaped by learners' psychological barriers, particularly their fear of making mistakes. This suggests that pronunciation instruction should address both linguistic accuracy and learners' confidence in speaking.

The study also identified several pedagogical challenges related to classroom management, student participation, and instructional practices. P1 explained that *"students wait for instructions instead of participating actively,"* whereas P2 believed that *"teaching the same way for every student does not work"* because learners have different learning needs. These findings support Keiler (2018), who emphasized that effective teaching requires teachers to adapt instructional practices to different classroom contexts. Likewise, Richards & Farrell (2005) highlighted that communicative language teaching encourages

active learner participation rather than teacher-centered instruction. Nevertheless, the present study extends previous research by demonstrating that pedagogical adaptation involved adjusting not only teaching methods but also teachers' expectations after moving from Western educational settings to the Indonesian EFL context, where classroom interaction tends to be more teacher-centered.

Another important finding concerns sociocultural challenges. P1 stated that many parents believed speaking-focused activities "*look easy*," while P2 observed that students were "*afraid of making mistakes*" because they feared being laughed at by their classmates. These findings support (Englund et al., 2018) who argued that cultural values and social expectations strongly influence classroom interaction and learning behaviour. From a narrative inquiry perspective, these experiences also reflect Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, in which teachers' experiences are shaped through interaction, continuity, and situation. However, this study further reveals that sociocultural adaptation extended beyond classroom interaction to include communication with parents and collaboration with local teachers. Therefore, successful English teaching in the Indonesian EFL context requires not only pedagogical competence but also cultural sensitivity and interpersonal skills.

Regarding adaptation strategies, both participants responded to linguistic challenges by emphasizing repeated pronunciation practice, pair work, and gradual speaking activities. As P1 explained, "*They practice together first because if you push them too fast, they freeze*," while P2 emphasized that "*If you keep practicing with them, they get better*." These findings are consistent with Harmer (2007), who argued that language learning develops through continuous exposure, repetition, and meaningful practice. Likewise, (Richards, 2010) maintained that communicative language teaching provides learners with opportunities to develop speaking competence through authentic interaction. However, unlike previous studies that mainly discuss instructional techniques, the present study shows that repeated practice was accompanied by emotional support, patience, and empathy, allowing learners to gradually overcome anxiety and develop confidence in speaking English.

The participants also adapted to pedagogical and sociocultural challenges by creating student-centered classrooms, establishing classroom rules, promoting small-group interaction, and building trusting relationships with learners. P1 emphasized the importance of classroom management by stating that "*If you don't have classroom management, you cannot really teach*," while P2 highlighted the importance of encouraging students without judging their mistakes. These findings support (Keiler, 2018) who argued that effective pedagogy requires

instructional flexibility, and are also consistent with Englund et al. (2018), who emphasized the importance of culturally responsive teaching. Nevertheless, the present study contributes additional insight by demonstrating that successful adaptation was closely connected to the participants' bilingual and immigrant backgrounds. Their previous experiences as English learners enabled them to empathize with Indonesian learners and create supportive learning environments that reduced anxiety while encouraging active participation.

Overall, the findings confirm previous research concerning linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural challenges in EFL teaching while extending the literature on adaptation strategies employed by Korean-American English tutors in the Indonesian context. Rather than merely modifying teaching techniques, the participants continuously negotiated linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural differences by combining communicative teaching practices with empathy, patience, and cultural awareness. These findings suggest that successful adaptation in cross-cultural EFL teaching is an ongoing process shaped by teachers' personal experiences, professional knowledge, and the sociocultural context in which teaching occurs.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study explored the challenges and adaptation strategies of Korean-American English tutors teaching in the Indonesian EFL context through a narrative inquiry approach. The findings revealed that the participants experienced three major challenges: linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural. Pronunciation differences, classroom management, teacher-centered learning, and students' fear of making mistakes emerged as the most significant challenges. To address these issues, the participants adopted various adaptation strategies, including repeated pronunciation practice, communicative and small group learning, flexible teaching methods, and supportive teacher–student relationships. These findings suggest that successful English teaching in cross-cultural contexts requires not only linguistic and pedagogical competence but also cultural awareness, empathy, and the ability to adapt teaching practices to learners' needs and local educational contexts. This study also contributes to the literature by providing insights into how Korean-American bilingual tutors negotiate linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural differences while teaching English in Indonesia.

Future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds to provide broader perspectives on cross-cultural English language teaching. Further studies may also investigate learners' perceptions of foreign English tutors or examine adaptation strategies in different EFL settings using various qualitative approaches. Practically, English teachers and educational institutions are encouraged to promote culturally responsive teaching practices and provide professional development opportunities that support teachers in adapting to diverse classroom contexts.

REFERENCES

- Al-Shalabi, F. (2021). Phonological Errors and L1 Interference: A Case Study of Jordanian Learners of English as a Foreign Language. *Journal of Studies in Education*, 11(3), 116. <https://doi.org/10.5296/jse.v11i3.18819>
- Bray—2021—Shadow education in Africa: private supplementary tutoring and its policy implications. (n.d.).
- Dewi, N. A. M. (2025). *EFL students' perceptions on learning English grammar at UNISMA*.
- Englund, C., Olofsson, A. D., & Price, L. (2018). The influence of sociocultural and structural contexts in academic change and development in higher education. *Higher Education*, 76(6), 1051–1069. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0254-1>
- Escobar Fandiño, F. G., & Silva Velandia, A. J. (2020). How an online tutor motivates E-learning English. *Heliyon*, 6(8), e04630. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e04630>
- Kafabih, A., Herda, R. K., & Monteza, A. M. M. (2025). Classroom Praxis of Applied Oral Communication Strategies in Enhancing English Speaking Skills in Indonesian Secondary School. *Research and Innovation in Applied Linguistics*, 3(2), 195–214. <https://doi.org/10.31963/rial.v3i2.5526>
- Keiler, L. S. (2018). Teachers' roles and identities in student-centered classrooms. *International Journal of STEM Education*, 5(1), 34. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-018-0131-6>
- Kusmayanti, S. (2025). Change of Trilingual National Schools to Cooperative Education Unit Schools (SPK) Impact of Permendikbud No. 31 of 2014. *Eduvest - Journal of Universal Studies*, 5(2), 3223–3240. <https://doi.org/10.59188/eduvest.v5i2.44729>

- Lincoln, Y. S., Guba, E. G., & Pilotta, J. J. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 9(4), 438–439. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(85\)90062-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8)
- Mata, R. T. M., & Espinosa, D. (2025). Illuminating the Lens of Non-English Graduates in Online Language Tutoring: A Multiple Case Inquiry. *Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 51(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.70838/pemj.510101>
- Naibaho, L. (2019). Teachers' roles in English language teaching: a student-centered learning approach. *International Journal of Research - GRANTHAALAYAH*, 7(4), 206–212. <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v7.i4.2019.892>
- Nazim, M., Alzubi, A. A. F., & Fakih, A.-H. (2024). EFL teachers' student-centered pedagogy and assessment practices: Challenges and solutions. *Journal of Education and Learning (EduLearn)*, 18(1), 217–227. <https://doi.org/10.11591/edulearn.v18i1.21142>
- Poedjiastutie, D., Mayaputri, V., & Arifani, Y. (2021). SOCIO-CULTURAL CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH TEACHING IN REMOTE AREAS OF INDONESIA. *TEFLIN Journal - A Publication on the Teaching and Learning of English*, 32(1), 97. <https://doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v32i1/97-116>
- Richards, J. C. (2010). Competence and Performance in Language Teaching. *RELC Journal*, 41(2), 101–122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688210372953>
- Richards, J. C., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2005). *Professional development for language teachers: Strategies for teacher learning*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667237>
- Sebayang, F. A. A., Basri, Muh. H., Rambing, R. R., & Yulianty Sanggelorang. (2025). Exploring Challenges Faced by English Language Teachers: Voices from EFL Teachers in Indonesia. *ETERNAL (English Teaching Journal)*, 16(1), 93–102. <https://doi.org/10.26877/eternal.v16i1.1104>
- Suwartono, T., Nurhayati, S., Mustari, M., & Erlawati, E. (2025). The adaptability and resilience of Indonesian EFL teachers during emergency online education. *Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology*, 9(2), 1071–1081. <https://doi.org/10.55214/25768484.v9i2.4653>
- Trent, J. (2016). Constructing professional identities in shadow education: Perspectives of private supplementary educators in Hong Kong. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 15(2), 115–130. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-015-9182-3>

Malang, June 25, 2026
Advisor I

Dr. Alfian Zuhairi, S.Pd., M.Pd.
NPP.1920200011