



RECONCEPTUALIZING EFL SPEAKING DEVELOPMENT THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT: THE EXREFER FIELD-BASED LEARNING MODEL

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Abstract:

This study reconceptualizes EFL speaking development through an experiential, field-based approach grounded in local culture. Conducted in Tanah Toraja, Indonesia, as tourism destination for its unique culture, it examines how the EXREFER model enhances speaking in authentic contexts using qualitative data from a ten-day program. Findings show that culturally meaningful content improves fluency and confidence, while familiar contexts reduce cognitive load and anxiety. Iterative cycles of experience, reflection, feedback, and re-application foster gradual improvement, enabling students to communicate effectively in English with foreign visitors. The study highlights the value of culturally responsive, experiential learning and proposes EXREFER as a practical framework for developing communicative competence beyond traditional classrooms.

Keywords: EFL speaking development; experiential learning; cultural immersion; EXREFER model; communicative competence

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English has become a crucial medium for international communication across education, business, and tourism sectors. The ability to communicate effectively in English is particularly valuable in regions that attract international visitors, as it enables meaningful interaction between local communities and people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Within this global context, developing students' speaking skills has become a central objective of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. However, despite years of formal instruction, many learners continue to face difficulties when required to communicate orally in real-life situations. This persistent gap raises important questions about the effectiveness of current pedagogical practices in fostering communicative competence.

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Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most complex language skills, as it requires the simultaneous coordination of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and communicative strategies in real time. Learners often struggle with speaking due to limited opportunities for practice, insufficient lexical resources, and heightened anxiety when using English (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Pham *et al.*, 2021). These challenges are particularly pronounced in EFL contexts, where exposure to authentic communication is minimal and language use is largely confined to the classroom. As a result, many students develop knowledge about the language without acquiring the ability to use it effectively in spontaneous interaction.

A growing body of research suggests that these limitations are closely related to dominant pedagogical approaches that prioritize form-focused instruction over communicative engagement. In many classrooms, teaching practices remain teacher-centered, emphasizing grammar exercises and written assessments. While such approaches contribute to linguistic knowledge, they often fail to create conditions for meaningful language use. Richards (2015) argues that effective language learning requires engagement in communicative activities that reflect real-life language use rather than artificial classroom tasks. This perspective calls for a rethinking of EFL speaking pedagogy toward approaches that prioritize authentic interaction and learner participation.

One promising direction in this pedagogical shift is the integration of experiential learning. Experiential learning emphasizes learning through direct experience, reflection, and application, enabling learners to construct knowledge through active engagement (Kolb, 2013; Rossetti, 2023). Rather than treating language as an abstract system, this approach positions language as a tool for communication in real-world contexts. When learners engage in concrete experiences, reflect on those experiences, and apply new understanding, they develop both linguistic competence and communicative confidence.

Closely related to experiential learning is the concept of learning beyond the classroom. Scholars have increasingly highlighted the importance of extending language learning into authentic social environments, where learners can interact with real interlocutors and negotiate meaning in unpredictable situations (Benson, 2017; Reinders & Benson, 2017). Such environments provide opportunities for spontaneous communication, fostering fluency, autonomy, and confidence. In this sense, authentic interaction becomes a critical component in developing speaking proficiency.

Another key dimension in rethinking EFL speaking pedagogy is the integration of culture. Language and culture are inherently interconnected, as language reflects the values, beliefs, and social practices of its users (Kramsch, 2018). Cultural engagement enables learners to understand the contexts in which language operates, making communication more meaningful and contextually appropriate. Furthermore, intercultural competence allows learners to communicate across cultural boundaries while reflecting on their own identities (Byram & Masuhara, 2013; Byram & Wagner, 2018). When students use English to express their own cultural knowledge, language learning becomes both personally relevant and socially grounded.

Recent studies on EFL learning in culturally rich and situated environments have shown a growing interest in integrating local culture into language instruction (Dewi *et al.*, 2025; Fitria, 2025; Miqawati *et al.*, 2024; Pritee, 2024; Wutun *et al.*, 2018). These studies consistently demonstrate that local culture is a valuable and often underutilized resource for enhancing students' speaking and writing skills. By engaging with familiar cultural practices, learners are able to connect language use with their lived experiences, which in turn increases motivation and communicative relevance (Wutun *et al.*, 2018; Rossetti, 2023). Moreover, tourism settings offer particularly dynamic contexts where language and culture intersect, positioning English as a lingua franca that facilitates interaction between local communities and international visitors (Ho, 2020). Such environments provide authentic opportunities for meaningful language use beyond the artificiality of classroom discourse.

However, despite this growing body of research, a significant gap remains in how cultural and experiential learning is operationalized in EFL pedagogy. Much of the existing work still treats culture as content to be transferred into the classroom rather than as context to be experienced. Even in studies that incorporate field visits, these are often short-term, incidental, and pedagogically under-structured, lacking sustained engagement and systematic integration into the learning process. As a result, critical elements such as continuous interaction, guided reflection, immediate feedback, and iterative language development are either absent or weakly implemented. This fragmentation limits the potential of experiential learning to produce meaningful and lasting improvements in students' communicative competence.

Positioned within this gap, the present study advances the field by proposing and implementing the EXREFER model as a structured, field-based learning framework. Unlike previous approaches, this study emphasizes sustained cultural immersion over an extended period (ten days), combined with daily cycles of reflection, feedback, and re-application. By situating learners directly within authentic cultural and communicative environments, and systematically linking experience with reflective and corrective processes, this study offers a more holistic and iterative model of language development. In doing so, it contributes a conceptual and pedagogical shift from fragmented cultural exposure to integrated experiential learning, thereby providing a more effective pathway for developing EFL speaking competence in real-world contexts.

In response to these gaps and limitations, this study proposes a reconceptualization of EFL speaking pedagogy through the integration of experiential and reflective practice in authentic cultural contexts. Specifically, it introduces the EXREFER learning model, which consists of four interconnected stages: Experience, Reflection, Feedback, and Re-application. Implemented through a ten-day cultural immersion program in Tanah Toraja. This model provides continuous cycles of real-world interaction, structured reflection, targeted feedback, and immediate re-application in subsequent communication. Students engage in cultural exploration and interaction with international tourists during the day, followed by reflective discussions and language-focused evaluation in the evening.

By embedding language learning within a sustained experiential-reflective cycle, this study seeks to move beyond episodic or classroom-bound approaches toward a more integrated and dynamic model of speaking development. The study contributes to the field by offering a theoretically grounded framework that connects experiential learning, intercultural engagement, and reflective practice in EFL pedagogy. In doing so, it provides new insights into how authentic cultural environments can be systematically utilized to enhance students' speaking proficiency and communicative competence.

Guided by this perspective, the study is designed to explore the following research questions:

- 1) How does the implementation of the EXREFER field-based learning model influence students' English-speaking development in culturally authentic contexts?
- 2) In what ways does sustained engagement with local culture facilitate students' confidence, fluency, and willingness to communicate in English?
- 3) How do the processes of experience, reflection, feedback, and re-application (EXREFER) contribute to iterative language development during field-based cultural learning?

Addressing these research questions, this study seeks to contribute both theoretically and pedagogically to the field of EFL learning. Theoretically, it advances an understanding of speaking development as an iterative, experiential, and context-dependent process, rather than a product of decontextualized classroom practice. Pedagogically, it offers the EXREFER model as a structured yet adaptable framework that integrates cultural immersion, reflective practice, and continuous feedback to support meaningful language use. By situating learners within authentic communicative environments and guiding them through cycles of experience and re-application, this study aims to demonstrate how sustained, field-based engagement can foster not only linguistic competence but also confidence and intercultural awareness. Ultimately, the findings are expected to inform more holistic and contextually relevant approaches to English language teaching in EFL settings.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore how students' engagement with local culture contributed to the development of their English-speaking skills. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining educational experiences because it focuses on understanding participants' perspectives, behaviors, and interactions within natural contexts rather than measuring variables quantitatively. According to Cresswell (2013), qualitative research is useful for exploring complex educational phenomena and for describing how individuals experience a particular program or activity.

The descriptive qualitative approach allows researchers to present detailed accounts of participants' learning experiences and to interpret how specific activities

influence students' engagement and communication practices. In this study, the focus was on describing students' participation in a field-based cultural exploration program, their interactions with local people and tourists, and their reflections during English sharing sessions. This approach is consistent with qualitative educational research that seeks to capture authentic learning experiences occurring in real-life settings (Cresswell, 2013).

2.2. Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Tanah Toraja, a region widely known as one of Indonesia's most distinctive cultural tourism destinations. Tanah Toraja attracts both domestic and international tourists because of its unique cultural traditions, traditional houses known as *Tongkonan*, and elaborate ceremonial practices. The presence of international visitors creates opportunities for communication between tourists and local residents, including students.

The selection of Tanah Toraja as the research setting was based on its strong cultural environment and its potential as an authentic learning space for English communication. Cultural heritage sites in the region provided natural contexts where students could observe cultural practices, interact with local communities, and communicate with tourists. Such environments support experiential learning, where students learn through direct engagement with real-life situations (Rossetti, 2023).

The participants in this study consisted of 15 students of Eksekutif Senior High School who voluntarily joined the field-based learning program. The students were secondary-level learners who had previously studied English in formal classroom settings but had limited opportunities to practice speaking English in authentic situations.

The teachers served as facilitators and observers during the program. Their role was to guide students during cultural exploration activities, encourage communication with local residents and tourists, and facilitate the evening reflection sessions conducted in English. Teachers also documented students' participation and interactions throughout the program. The program was conducted over a period of ten days, during which students participated in daily cultural exploration and reflective learning activities.

2.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over a ten-day field-based learning program through multiple qualitative techniques, including participant observation, students' oral reports, audio-recorded reflection sessions, and researcher field notes. The data collection process was systematically structured based on the **EXREFER learning model**, which consists of four interconnected stages: *Experience*, *Reflection*, *Feedback*, and *Re-application*. This cyclical framework guided both the learning activities and the data generation process.

The first stage, *Experience*, took place during daily field activities from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Students visited various cultural sites in Tanah Toraja, where they observed cultural practices, interacted with local residents, and explored significant cultural landmarks. During this stage, participant observation was conducted by the teacher-

researcher to document students' engagement, participation, and communication behaviors.

Students primarily used Bahasa Indonesia when interacting with local residents to ensure accurate understanding of cultural information. However, at tourism sites, they also engaged in spontaneous interactions with international tourists using English. These naturally occurring conversations provided authentic opportunities for students to practice speaking, negotiate meaning, and explain local cultural practices in real communicative contexts.

The researcher focused on observing students' willingness to initiate communication, their strategies in maintaining interaction, and their confidence in using English. These observations were recorded in detailed field notes.

The second stage, *Reflection*, was conducted through structured evening sessions held daily for approximately two hours. During these sessions, students presented the cultural knowledge they had gathered, shared their field experiences, and reflected on their interactions with local residents and international tourists.

Each student was encouraged to describe what they observed, explain cultural practices in their own words, and recount communication experiences, particularly challenges encountered when speaking English. These reflective activities allowed students to process their experiences, connect new knowledge with prior understanding, and articulate their thoughts in a supportive learning environment.

All reflection sessions were audio-recorded to capture students' narratives, language use, and evolving communicative competence. These recordings served as primary data for analyzing students' speaking development, confidence, and intercultural awareness.

The third stage, *Feedback*, was integrated into the reflection sessions. Following students' presentations, the teacher provided immediate and targeted feedback on their language use, including vocabulary choice, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and communicative clarity.

Feedback was not delivered in a corrective or evaluative manner alone, but as a form of guided support aimed at improving students' future communication. The teacher also addressed specific communication difficulties reported by students, such as hesitation, lack of vocabulary, or difficulty responding to tourists' questions.

This stage played a crucial role in bridging experience and improvement, as it allowed students to become aware of their linguistic limitations while receiving practical strategies for more effective communication.

The final stage, *Re-application*, occurred on the following day, when students returned to the field and applied the feedback they had received. Students were encouraged to consciously use improved expressions, try alternative communication strategies, and engage more actively in conversations with tourists.

This iterative process created a continuous learning cycle in which each day's experience was informed by the previous day's reflection and feedback. The re-

application stage enabled students to refine their speaking skills progressively through repeated exposure to authentic communication situations.

In addition to the EXREFER-based activities, the researcher maintained comprehensive field notes throughout the program. These notes documented significant interactions, students' behavioral changes, notable communication events, and contextual factors influencing learning. The field notes complemented the audio recordings by providing situational context and capturing non-verbal aspects of communication.

Formal interviews and standardized speaking tests were not employed in this study, as the research aimed to explore students' lived experiences and natural communication practices rather than measure proficiency quantitatively. The combination of experiential activities, reflective discussions, and iterative communication provided rich qualitative data that captured the dynamic process of speaking development in authentic contexts.



Figure 1: The cycle diagram of EXREFER Flow

2.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was considered appropriate for examining students' experiential learning processes, communicative practices, and reflections within the **EXREFER** learning cycle.

The analysis followed a systematic and iterative process. First, all data sources—including field notes, observation records, and audio-recorded reflection sessions—were transcribed and reviewed repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. This stage enabled

the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of students' experiences during the ten-day program.

Second, initial coding was conducted by identifying meaningful units of data related to students' engagement, communication attempts, emotional responses, and interaction with both local residents and international tourists. Coding was both inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, and deductive, guided by the EXREFER framework (Experience, Reflection, Feedback, and Re-application).

Third, the codes were organized into broader thematic categories that reflected key dimensions of the learning process. These themes were then interpreted in relation to the four stages of the EXREFER model. For example, themes such as authentic interaction and communicative struggle were associated with the Experience stage, while self-awareness and meaning-making emerged during the Reflection stage. Similarly, language correction and strategy development were linked to Feedback, and improved confidence and adaptive communication were connected to Re-application.

Fourth, the researcher conducted a process of theme refinement and interpretation, ensuring that each theme accurately represented patterns across the dataset and contributed to answering the research questions. This stage involved revisiting the data to confirm consistency and coherence between codes, themes, and the overall analytical framework.

To enhance the **trustworthiness** of the analysis, data triangulation was applied by comparing findings across multiple sources, including observation data, students' oral reports, and field notes. In addition, prolonged engagement during the ten-day program allowed the researcher to capture in-depth insights into students' learning processes. Reflexive consideration was also maintained throughout the analysis to minimize researcher bias in interpreting the data.

Through this analytical approach, the study sought to reveal how sustained cultural immersion, structured reflection, and iterative feedback contributed to the development of students' English-speaking skills. The analysis also highlighted how the EXREFER model functioned as a dynamic learning cycle that supported both linguistic development and intercultural understanding.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents an integrated account of the findings and their theoretical interpretation, drawing on field observations, students' oral reports, reflection sessions, and informal interactions during the ten-day field-based learning program in *Tanah Toraja*. The analysis demonstrates that students' English-speaking development emerged through the interaction of experiential engagement, cultural familiarity, social collaboration, and iterative reflection as conceptualized in the EXREFER model.

3.1. Experiential Engagement and the Emergence of Intrinsic Motivation

A central finding of this study is the strong sense of enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation displayed by students during cultural exploration. In contrast to classroom-based instruction, students actively engaged with cultural artifacts and local informants, demonstrating curiosity through both basic and complex questioning. Tary reflected: *"This is the first model of learning I joined. I can get the information directly from the local people. I am eager to know the specific objects. It is quite interesting."* This finding aligns with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), which posits that learning begins with concrete experience and evolves through reflective processes. The field-based setting provided direct experience, enabling students to construct knowledge actively. Furthermore, the findings support task-based language teaching principles (Ellis, 2017; Nunan, 2015), which emphasize that authentic tasks and meaningful interaction enhance motivation and communicative competence.

In addition, Melly noted: *"Learning directly makes me curious to find more local knowledge that they have. My perspective is broadening."* These responses indicate that students were not merely completing assigned tasks but were engaged in self-driven inquiry. The recursive nature of their questioning—where one interaction led to further curiosity—suggests that learning was dynamic and interaction-driven.

The tourism context also reflects authentic learning environments (Smaldino, 2020), where learners engage with real-world language use, thereby strengthening pragmatic competence. In this study, students' sustained curiosity demonstrates how authenticity can transform learning into an intrinsically motivated process.

3.2. Cognitive and Emotional Engagement in Situated Learning

During the exploration, the teacher observed that students' engagement was both cognitive and emotional. Cognitively, students activated prior knowledge when encountering familiar cultural objects. For instance, Sharon asked: *"Is this called Depatory? My friend gave me some. It is delicious."* This indicates that students connected previous experiences with new observations, reflecting schema activation in learning (Pennycook, 2022). Such processes enable deeper comprehension as learners integrate new knowledge into existing cognitive frameworks. Emotionally, students expressed admiration and curiosity. Elin stated: *"This sarong looks nice. Wonderful! How intelligent is the person who knitted this one?"* These affective responses suggest that learning was not purely intellectual but also emotionally engaging. According to Dörnyei (2019), positive emotions such as enjoyment and curiosity significantly enhance language motivation and persistence. Similarly, Rahimi and Bigdeli (2014) argue that emotional engagement broadens learners' cognitive processes and supports deeper learning.

The multisensory nature of the field setting—where students could see, touch, and experience cultural objects—further supports embodied cognition theory (Zou *et al.*, 2025), which suggests that physical interaction enhances understanding and retention. Thus, the integration of cognitive and emotional engagement contributed to meaningful and memorable learning experiences.

3.3. Development of Communicative Competence through Authentic Interaction

Another key finding is the development of students' communicative competence through real-world interaction. The observation noted that students demonstrated the ability to initiate conversations using polite expressions such as: *"Excuse me..." "May I ask...?" "Can I...?"* For example, Gaby stated: *"Excuse me, Mom, may I ask some questions? We are students from SMA Eksekutif."* Students also maintained interaction through follow-up questions. Agung asked: *"Sorry, what about the ritual ceremony? Do people wear this cloth?"* These interactions indicate the emergence of communicative competence, including sociolinguistic and strategic competence (Shadiev & Wang, 2022). Students were not only producing language but also managing communication effectively.

This supports interactionist perspectives in second language acquisition (MacDonald *et al.*, 2001), which emphasize that meaning negotiation during interaction facilitates language development. Additionally, students' engagement with both local informants and international tourists reflects intercultural communicative competence (Byram & Wagner, 2018), where learners adapt language use across cultural contexts.

The findings also align with situated learning theory (Reinders & Benson, 2017), suggesting that language learning is most effective when embedded in authentic social practices rather than isolated classroom exercises.

3.4. Collaborative Learning and Social Mediation

The program's structured group work fostered collaborative and empathetic learning. Students were assigned roles as primary interviewers, ensuring active participation and shared responsibility. Ryan stated: *"I became responsible at my site. I have to prepare some questions to help others."* These findings highlight the importance of peer support in learning. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with sociocultural theory, which posits that learning occurs through social interaction and is mediated by more capable peers (Macgilchrist *et al.*, 2020).

Field practice learning led students to collaborative learning. The task structure encourages students to collaborate with others. Donry added: *"This is a good strategy to help each other. If I missed this information, I can get it from my friend who is in charge."* These findings argued that collaborative learning also reflects principles of cooperative learning (Huang & Lajoie, 2023), where shared goals and role distribution enhance both academic and social outcomes. In this study, collaboration reduced individual pressure, encouraged participation, and facilitated knowledge sharing, thereby supporting language development.

3.5. Confidence Building through Meaningful Content and Reflection

The evening presentation sessions revealed a substantial increase in students' confidence, particularly when they were equipped with meaningful and personally constructed content. Students consistently reported that their ability to speak improved when they had sufficient knowledge to share. As Cita stated, *"I can speak English in the presentation because I have a lot of information to say."* Similarly, Meloni noted, *"The presentation is*

running smoothly because I know what to say." These responses indicate that content familiarity functions as a cognitive scaffold, enabling learners to focus on message delivery rather than struggling with idea generation.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding can be interpreted through Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), which emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input in language acquisition. The students' prior engagement in field activities provided rich and meaningful input (i+1), which later became accessible output during presentations. In this sense, the input was not only comprehensible but also contextually grounded, making it easier for learners to retrieve and articulate information. In addition, Long's Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) further explains that input becomes more effective when it is negotiated through interaction. The students' daytime interactions with peers, local informants, and tourists allowed them to process and refine input, which subsequently enhanced their speaking performance.

The findings also strongly support Content-Based Instruction (CBI) (Gunawan *et al.*, 2025), where language learning is integrated with meaningful subject matter. In this study, local cultural content served as the foundation for communication, allowing students to speak with greater fluency and confidence. Rather than focusing on isolated language forms, students engaged in purposeful communication, which aligns with the principle that language is best learned when used as a medium for conveying meaning.

Tary's reflection further highlights the role of structured speaking practice: *"This is a very beneficial moment. I learn to deliver short presentations in English. I seldom do presentations, so now I am learning."* This indicates that repeated presentation opportunities contributed not only to fluency but also to the development of organizational and discourse competence. Such improvement is consistent with research on academic speaking (Al-khresheh, 2024), which emphasizes the importance of regular, structured oral practice in developing coherence and clarity.

From an affective standpoint, the findings align with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1992). When students possess meaningful content, their anxiety decreases because they feel more prepared and less fearful of communication breakdown. This reduction in anxiety lowers the affective filter, allowing for more effective language acquisition. Furthermore, having something meaningful to say increases motivation and willingness to communicate, which are critical factors in successful language learning.

Overall, the integration of meaningful content and reflective presentation creates a supportive learning cycle in which input, interaction, and output are interconnected. This process not only enhances linguistic competence but also fosters confidence, enabling students to become more effective and autonomous speakers.

3.6. Local Culture as a Facilitator of Language Production

A significant finding of this study is the role of local culture as a productive linguistic resource in supporting students' English-speaking development. Students reported that discussing familiar cultural topics enabled them to speak more easily and confidently. However, at the initial stage, some students experienced uncertainty regarding the use

of local terms in English discourse. For instance, Siwar asked, “*Can I use local terms in English?*” This hesitation indicates that a target-culture orientation—where English is perceived as tied exclusively to native-speaker norms—remained dominant in students’ mindset.

To address this, the teacher clarified that local cultural terms, particularly proper nouns, could be appropriately incorporated into English communication. Although some students initially found this practice unusual and even responded with laughter, they gradually adapted and began to use local terminology when interacting with foreign visitors. This shift reflects a movement from linguistic insecurity toward greater communicative flexibility.

As students became more accustomed to this approach, they recognized its facilitative role in communication. May explained, “*It is easier to speak and explain local culture because many words are familiar and help me to speak.*” This suggests that familiarity with content significantly reduces the cognitive demands of language production, allowing learners to focus more on meaning-making than on lexical retrieval.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding aligns with the concept of translanguaging (Wei & García, 2016), which posits that multilingual learners draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to construct meaning. By allowing the integration of local terms into English discourse, students were able to bridge gaps between prior knowledge and target language use, thereby enhancing fluency and communicative effectiveness.

Moreover, the findings support culturally responsive pedagogy (Wutun *et al.*, 2018), which emphasizes the importance of incorporating learners’ cultural backgrounds into instructional practices. The use of local cultural content not only made learning more accessible but also increased students’ engagement and confidence.

In addition, this practice reflects the development of intercultural communicative competence (Byram & Wagner, 2018). By explaining their own culture in English, students were positioned as cultural informants, enabling them to negotiate meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This shift highlights that English is not merely a vehicle for expressing target culture but also a global medium for representing local identities.

Overall, integrating local culture into language use reduced cognitive load, enhanced fluency, and empowered students to communicate more authentically and confidently in English.

3.7. Reduced Anxiety in Natural Learning Environments

Another important finding of this study is the reduction of students’ anxiety in natural, field-based learning environments. Throughout the program, the group atmosphere was consistently positive and enthusiastic. Students appeared to enjoy the learning process, suggesting that the activities functioned not only as educational experiences but also as recreational learning, where engagement and enjoyment supported language development.

Students reported feeling more relaxed when speaking English outside the classroom context. Ryan noted, *"Speaking English out of the class is fun. I talk about something I touch and see."* This response highlights the importance of experiential learning, where direct interaction with real objects, places, and situations allows learners to engage multiple senses. Such sensory involvement makes learning more meaningful, memorable, and stimulating, thereby facilitating language production.

Similarly, Elin expressed a sense of emotional comfort despite linguistic limitations: *"I feel relaxed and excited to talk... Although I make mistakes, I enjoy talking."* This statement reflects a shift in students' attitudes toward errors—from fear of making mistakes to acceptance as part of the learning process. The absence of formal evaluation pressure in natural settings appears to create a psychologically safe environment for experimentation and communication.

These findings are consistent with research on foreign language anxiety (Suzuki & Roger, 2014), which suggests that traditional classroom environments often heighten anxiety due to constant evaluation and performance expectations. In contrast, authentic, real-world contexts tend to lower anxiety levels by emphasizing communication over correctness, thereby encouraging learners to take risks in using the language.

Furthermore, this finding aligns with the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model (Toyoda & Yashima, 2021), which emphasizes the role of situational and contextual factors in shaping learners' readiness to speak. The informal, meaningful, and socially interactive nature of field-based activities increased students' willingness to initiate and sustain communication in English.

Overall, the natural learning environment reduced psychological barriers, enhanced enjoyment, and fostered greater participation, enabling students to engage more freely and confidently in English communication.

3.8. Iterative Language Development through Re-application

The final stage of the program, in which students acted as tourism informants, represents the culmination of learning within the EXREFER model. After nine days of continuous experience and reflection, students were required to apply their knowledge and language skills in authentic communicative situations. Tary expressed both the challenge and achievement of this task: *"This is a very challenging task... but I am very happy because most of them understand me."*

This stage highlights how sustained exposure and repeated practice in real contexts contribute significantly to students' confidence and speaking ability. Sharon emphasized the importance of iterative learning: *"Through several days of practice and night reflection, I can use English to speak with visitors."* Similarly, May noted, *"I gained confidence after eight days of practice... It helped me improve my English."* These reflections indicate that learning was not instantaneous but developed progressively through cycles of practice, feedback, and improvement.

From a theoretical perspective, this process reflects Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984), where learners move from concrete experience to reflection and then to

active re-application. It also supports the Output Hypothesis (Shahini, 2025), which suggests that producing language enables learners to refine their linguistic competence.

Overall, the informant role required students to integrate cultural knowledge, language use, and contextual understanding, demonstrating the effectiveness of iterative, field-based learning in developing communicative competence.

The findings of this study demonstrate that students' English-speaking development was significantly enhanced through sustained engagement in experiential, culturally grounded learning structured by the EXREFER model. First, students' confidence increased when they had meaningful cultural content to share, enabling more fluent and purposeful communication. Second, local culture functioned as an effective linguistic resource; familiarity with cultural knowledge reduced cognitive load and allowed students to focus on conveying meaning, supported by the flexible use of local terms within English discourse. Third, natural, field-based learning environments lowered students' anxiety and fostered greater willingness to communicate, as the absence of formal evaluation created a more relaxed and supportive atmosphere. Fourth, direct interaction with real contexts engaged students' senses and made learning more memorable and relevant. Finally, the iterative cycle of experience, reflection, feedback, and re-application led to gradual yet significant improvement in students' fluency and confidence, culminating in their ability to perform as tourism informants and communicate effectively with international visitors. Overall, the findings highlight that integrating authentic cultural experiences, reflective practice, and repeated communicative opportunities creates a powerful learning process that supports both linguistic development and learner confidence in EFL contexts.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the integration of local cultural engagement within a field-based learning framework, as operationalized through the EXREFER model, provides a powerful and theoretically grounded approach to enhancing students' English-speaking development in EFL contexts. Implemented in *Tanah Toraja*, the program moved learning beyond classroom boundaries and situated it within authentic sociocultural environments, allowing language to emerge as a functional tool for communication rather than as an abstract system of rules.

The findings confirm that experiential learning plays a central role in facilitating meaningful language acquisition. In the EXREFER learning cycle, students engaged in a continuous process of concrete experience, reflection, feedback, and re-application. Through direct interaction with cultural artifacts, local informants, and international tourists, students actively constructed knowledge and developed communicative competence. This authentic engagement not only enhanced linguistic performance but also stimulated intrinsic motivation, as learners became active participants in knowledge construction rather than passive recipients.

Another key conclusion is the significant role of local culture as a mediating resource for language learning. The familiarity of cultural content enabled students to draw upon prior knowledge, thereby reducing cognitive load and facilitating more fluent language production. The incorporation of local terms within English discourse reflects translanguaging practices, allowing learners to utilize their full linguistic repertoire. This finding underscores the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, suggesting that integrating learners' cultural backgrounds into EFL instruction enhances both accessibility and communicative effectiveness.

The study also highlights the importance of social interaction and collaboration in language development. Consistent with sociocultural theory, learning was mediated through peer interaction, shared responsibilities, and guided participation. Collaborative structures not only supported knowledge construction but also created a supportive environment that reduced anxiety and encouraged risk-taking. As a result, students developed both linguistic and interpersonal competencies, including the ability to negotiate meaning and adapt language use across contexts.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the role of affective factors in shaping language learning outcomes. The natural and informal learning environment significantly reduced students' speaking anxiety, aligning with the affective filter hypothesis and the willingness to communicate model. Students reported feeling more relaxed and confident when speaking about real and familiar experiences, which in turn increased their participation and engagement. Emotional involvement, including curiosity and enjoyment, further contributed to sustained learning and deeper cognitive processing.

The integration of structured reflection and repeated practice also emerged as a critical component of the learning process. Evening presentation sessions provided opportunities for students to organize ideas, articulate experiences, and receive feedback, thereby enhancing both fluency and discourse competence. This iterative process supports the output hypothesis, highlighting the importance of language production in refining linguistic accuracy and communicative effectiveness.

Finally, the culmination of the program in the informant role illustrates the effectiveness of iterative learning through re-application. Students' ability to function as cultural informants for international tourists demonstrates not only improved fluency but also the development of intercultural communicative competence. This stage provides concrete evidence that sustained experiential engagement, combined with reflection and feedback, leads to measurable improvements in real-world communication. In conclusion, the study affirms that field-based cultural engagement, when systematically structured through experiential and reflective cycles, offers a robust pedagogical model for EFL instruction. By integrating authentic contexts, cultural relevance, social interaction, and iterative practice, the EXREFER model fosters holistic language development encompassing linguistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions. Future research may extend this model by exploring longer interventions, diverse

cultural contexts, and more rigorous assessment frameworks to further validate and refine its applicability across different EFL settings.

5. Implications of the Study

This study offers several important implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy, particularly in contexts where opportunities for authentic communication are limited. First, the findings highlight the value of integrating experiential, field-based learning into language instruction. Moving beyond classroom-bound practices, teachers can design learning experiences that situate language use in real-life contexts, enabling students to develop communicative competence through meaningful interaction. This suggests a shift from form-focused instruction toward use-oriented and context-driven learning environments.

Second, the study underscores the pedagogical potential of local culture as a resource for language learning. By allowing students to draw on familiar cultural knowledge, teachers can reduce cognitive load and increase learners' confidence in speaking. This approach aligns with culturally responsive pedagogy and supports the idea that English can function as a medium for expressing local identities, rather than merely reproducing target-language cultures. Curriculum designers are therefore encouraged to incorporate locally relevant content into EFL materials and activities.

Third, the EXREFER model provides a structured yet flexible framework for language development through iterative learning cycles. The integration of Experience, Reflection, Feedback, and Re-application facilitates continuous improvement, allowing students to refine their language use over time. This model can be adapted for various educational settings, including formal schools, short immersion programs, and community-based learning initiatives.

Additionally, the study suggests that reducing anxiety through natural learning environments can significantly enhance students' willingness to communicate. Teachers should create supportive, low-pressure contexts that encourage risk-taking and view errors as part of the learning process.

Overall, this study advocates for a more holistic, culturally grounded, and experiential approach to EFL instruction, where language learning is closely connected to students' lived experiences and social realities.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, it involved a relatively small number of participants within a single field-based program, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The results are therefore context-specific, reflecting the unique sociocultural setting of Tanah Toraja. Second, the study relied primarily on qualitative data—such as observations, reflections, and oral reports—without incorporating quantitative measures. As a result, improvements in speaking proficiency

cannot be statistically verified, and the absence of standardized assessment tools restricts objective evaluation. Third, the ten-day duration may not adequately capture the long-term impact and sustainability of the EXREFER model, given that language development typically requires extended exposure and practice.

Future research should address these limitations by involving larger and more diverse participant groups across different contexts. Incorporating quantitative designs, such as pre- and post-tests with validated instruments, would provide stronger empirical evidence of effectiveness. Additionally, mixed-methods approaches are recommended to offer a more comprehensive understanding of both processes and outcomes. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in examining the sustained impact of experiential, field-based learning. Further exploration across varied cultural settings may also help refine and expand the applicability of the EXREFER model in EFL pedagogy.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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