Community Perspectives on Cultural and Psychosocial Challenges of Rural Primary School ESL Learners in Zimbabwe.

Chikwaka-Mpezeni Precious Maudy[1], Chigwedere Yuleth[2]

[1]Faculty of Gender and Transformative Sciences, Department of Educational Psychology, Women's University in Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe

[2]Faculty of Gender and Transformative Sciences, Department of Communication and Languages, Women's University in Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0229

Received: 14 April 2026; Accepted: 20 April 2026; Published: 12 May 2026

ABSTRACT

Influenced by a poststructural perspective, this study explored the community perception of cultural and psychosocial challenges experienced by rural primary school learners of English as a second language (ESL) in Murewa District, Zimbabwe. Rural primary school ESL learners encounter a complex and psychosocial challenges that disrupt their lingustic progress and psychological well-being. The study employed a qualitative research approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with community members and naturalistic observations of learners in their home settings. The data were then analyzed. The findings of the study revealed that although participants reported that ESL offers learners access to broader educational opportunities and cognitive growth, it may contribute to cultural identity shifts in learners, which often reduces participation in community cultural activities and psychosocial stress. Other themes that emerged were related to the intergenerational tensions that may occur, language-driven social self-positioning by the learners, threats to the preservation of indigenous cultural practices, and diminished self-esteem. Findings of the study also included psychosocial challenges including anxiety and lower self-esteem in ESL learners which also reduce active participation during classroom instruction. Participants suggested that the community could mitigate these challenges by actively supporting learners as they underwent the process of cultural identity negotiation. The study recommends that ESL learning in rural contexts be conceptualized as a dynamic process in which learners go through a process of cultural identity transformation. This highlights the importance of community support during reconstruction for the holistic well-being of ESL learners in rural contexts and the need for culturally responsive approaches and the need for school-based support.

Keywords: Cultural identity, English as a second language, psychosocial challenges, poststructuralism

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st Century, English remains a global language with more than 380 million people speaking it as a first language and more that 200 million using it as a second language (Alfarhan, 2016). The globalisation of the English language is multifaceted, as it is recognised worldwide not only as a tool for cross-cultural communication, but also as one for economic success and as such its use is dominant in different cultural contexts across the globe. Consequently, English as a second language learning has spread widely across the globe. As the world imminently moves towards becoming one global village, the role of language in shaping cultural identity is a critical area of study. Cultural identity is defined as the process by which individuals construct their perceptions of self and their social meaning within a community (Yan, 2018). The concept, therefore, stresses key features of social life, such as race, nationality, language, religion, beliefs, norms and values, amongst others, which are rooted in the community. The implication here is that cultural identity is predicated on individuals' perceptions of themselves and their connections to their community. The concept entails the internalisation of cultural aspects that influence communication, values, and perceptions of self and community (Lamby & Foskett, 2015).

Language serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a repository of cultural values, traditions and worldviews (Vizulete, 2022). Language and cultural identity are interrelated constructs. Amiot et al (2018) assert that it is through language that people can determine their cultural identity. This suggests that language is a key to the development of an individual's cultural identity. Similarly, Teng (2018) argues that it is through language that one's identity is determined; it transmits the culture of individual's beliefs, attitudes, and identity. Language is also critical for the preservation of an individual's culture. Whether the learner is an adult or a child, learning a second language, therefore, impacts on an individual's sense of cultural identity as it interacts with it, culminating in some form of cultural identity negotiation taking place. Rahimi (2021) suggests that learners of English as a second language (ESL) are likely to experience shifts in their cultural identity as they navigate the contrast between their native linguistic and cultural frameworks and those associated with the English language. A significant number of psycholinguist and sociolingustic scholars support this assumption (Johnson, 2009; Lobaton, 2012; Alfarham, Jia 2019; Khan 2021 and Abdalgane 2022). One of the key findings of Abdalgane's (2022) study reveals that a learner's indigenous cultural identity is somewhat threatened by ESL learning. This suggests that in the process of acquiring English, learners also adopt some of the cultural practices associated with the language, which conversely may translate to the loss some aspects of their native culture. Alfarhan (2016), for example, argues that when English is learnt for use beyond that of a medium of communication, this may result in the emergence of a new sense of identity in the learners.

Similarly, in language education studies, scholars emphasise the influence that second language learning has on cultural identity and have considered the effect of several factors, on the language acquisition process, including motivation and investment, amongst others (Tain & Dumlao, 2020; Hosain 2023). Concerning young learners, Nikolov and Djigunovic (2019) suggest that children are usually motivated, curious, uninhibited and positive when learning a new language. Children in rural areas, however, may display different levels of motivation due to some of the challenges experienced in the living and learning circumstances within a non-urban context (Pham, 2021). The focus on English has contributed to concerns over the diminishing role of indigenous languages and cultural values among children of school going age, especially in rural communities where traditional practices are more firmly embedded in the social fabric. Importantly, Pham (2021) asserts that English language education is underexplored in rural areas. Additionally, while existing research on the African continent has explored the broad implications of English as a second language learning on cultural identity, there is a dearth of literature concerning the cultural identity related challenges of ESL learning that may be faced by young learners in rural settings. This study, therefore, attempts to address that gap by focusing on community perceptions on the challenges related to the cultural identity negotiation faced by rural primary school ESL learners in Murewa District, Zimbabwe. It is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the process of ESL learning affect primary school learners' self-perception and their connection to their community in Murewa District?

2. What are the community perceptions of the challenges related to the cultural identity negotiation that takes place as these primary school learners acquire English?

By responding to these questions, the study seeks to show how rural communities often play a central role in shaping children's socialization, identity formation, and cultural engagement. Rather than viewing English learning only in terms of test scores or language proficiency, this study situates it within children's cultural identity development, sense of self, and relationships with their family and community. Therefore, this study adopted a poststructuralist lens to provide a holistic understanding of community members' perceptions of rural ESL learners' experiences. This theory conceptualizes identity as fluid, fragmented, and socially constructed, as opposed to being fixed (Norton, 2013; Norton, 2014). From this perspective, language learning is not just the acquisition of linguistic competence but a process through which learners negotiate their identities in relation to the target language, their cultural backgrounds, and the social contexts in which they participate. Power dynamics are inherent in these interactions, influencing those whose voices are privileged or marginalized (Ahmed, 2021). For rural Zimbabwean learners, engagement in English undoubtedly intersects with local cultural norms and ethnic identities, shaping learners' sense of self and belonging (Mupinga, 2021; Sibanda & Tshelhla, 2025).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examines community members' perceptions on how identity negotiation in English as a second language learning affects learners' cultural self-perception and their connection to their community in rural primary schools in Murewa, Zimbabwe through a poststructural lens. Poststructuralism challenges the idea of fixed, stable identities and instead emphasises the fluid, fragmented, and socially constructed nature of identity that is continuously negotiated across different contexts (Darvin and Norton, 2017; Norton, 2014). According to this theory, identity is not something that individuals are born with or that they possess inherently, but rather it is something that is constructed through their interactions with others and the cultural and social contexts in which they exist (Norton, 2015). This theory also suggests that language learners do not simply acquire a new language, but rather negotiate and construct their identities in relation to the target language and culture, as well as their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds. When this lens is used as part of a conceptual framework, it acknowledges the significant role that psychosocial and cultural factors play in language learning and identity reconstruction as shown in Figure 1 below, it illustrates how these contexts help to shape the individual.

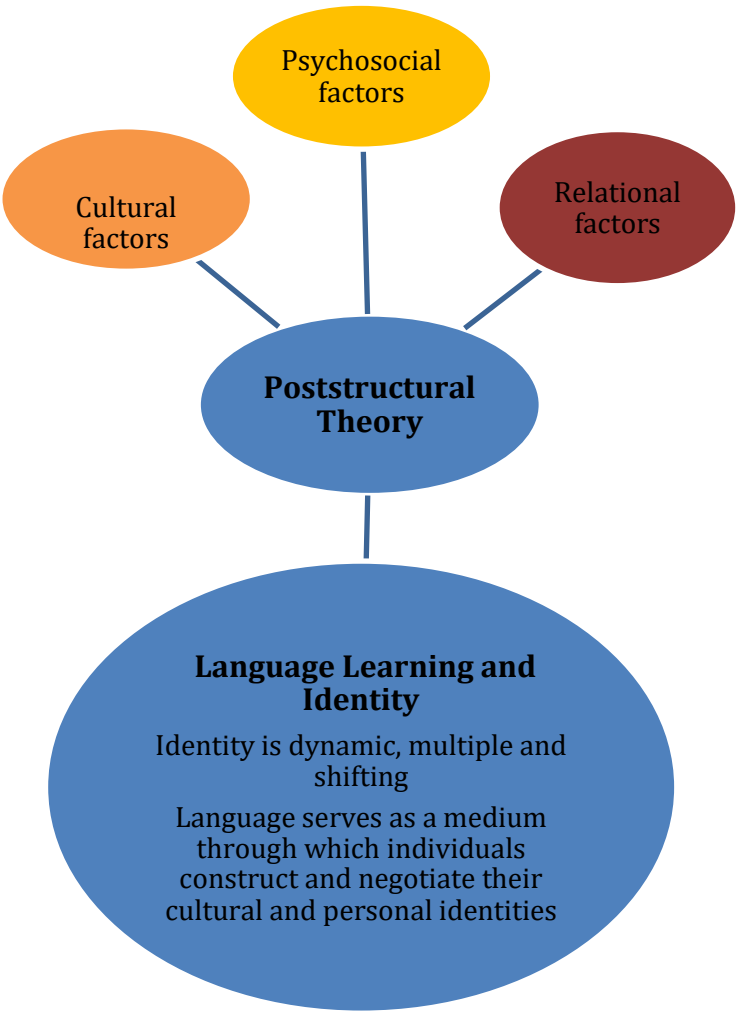

Figure 1: Poststructuralism, Language Learning and Identity Conceptual Framework. Source: Researchers, 2025

The implication of this framework is that language learning is not just a cognitive process, but also a social and cultural process of identity negotiation and construction that shows that identity is relational, mediated and situated It views identity as a site of ongoing negotiation, influenced by the power dynamics inherent in language use and acquisition (Ahmed, 2021). As such, the researchers consider it a valuable conceptual approach to use in exploring how the community members in Murewa District perceive the changes in the young rural learners' sense of self and community belonging the more they engage with English. - a language tied to global cultural forces - within their local ethnic context (Mupinga, 2021; Sibanda & Tshelhla, 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was undertaken within the interpretivist paradigm, which is particularly suited to the exploration of community perspectives on cultural identity negotiation in the context of primary-school ESL in rural settings. Interpretivism recognizes the differentiated and stratified nature of the social domain and acknowledges the subjectivities and meanings that individuals attach to their activities as essential to understanding social phenomena (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). By focusing on social constructions such as language, consciousness, and human interactions (Goldkuhl, 2017), the interpreters' paradigm offered a sound epistemological foundation for this study, which adopted a qualitative approach.

To conduct this study, a single case study was adopted. The district was purposefully chosen because it represents a typical rural context in Zimbabwe, where community-based cultural and linguistic practices intersect with formal education systems. Murewa District features a mixture of traditional rural lifestyles and exposure to formal schooling. This makes it a valuable case for examining how ESL learning may influence learners' engagement with community norms and values and how this, in turn, may influence learners' sense of cultural identity. While unique in certain localized characteristics, the district shares demographic, socio-cultural and educational features with other rural districts in Zimbabwe. This allows for cautious transferability of findings to comparable rural contexts (Yin, 2018). The case study approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of learners and their communities, highlighting the nuanced perspectives that broader quantitative methods could overlook.

The target population consisted of communities surrounding three primary schools in Murewa District (Hurungwe, Murewa Central, and Kambarami Primary Schools). Schools were selected based on their accessibility, representation of different socioeconomic strata, and community involvement in the district. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were considered information-rich in relation to the study objectives. Specifically, community leaders were selected for their demonstrated engagement with learners' educational experiences and cultural practices, which enabled them to offer key insights into this study. Community leaders were also selected based on their formal and informal influence within the community. This included roles such as village heads, elders, and other recognized leadership positions. The criteria for selecting parents included having primary school children enrolled in the aforementioned schools.

The total sample for the in-depth interviews consisted of nine participants, while the sample size was small, it allowed for in-depth qualitative analysis and provided rich detailed data on the subject matter. The small sample size and focus on information-rich individuals were key elements in ensuring a successful study that prioritized depth and contextual understanding over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The demographics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' background

Participant Pseudonym	Parent/Community Leader	Gender	Age	Formal Education Level Attained	Achieved Status/ Occupation	Primary Language
P1	Community leader	Female	52	O' level	Formally employed	Shona
P2	Community leader	Male	44	O' level	Village head	Shona
P3	Parent	Female	48	A' level	Self employed	Shona
P4	Parent	Male	54	O' level	Formally employed	Shona
P5	Parent	Female	68	ZJC	Retiree	Shona
P6	Parent	Male	50	O' level	Self employed	Shona
P7	Parent	Female	36	A' level	Self employed	Shona
P8	Parent	Female	41	O' level	Self employed	Shona
P9	Community leader	Male	62	O' level	Retiree	Shona

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine participants drawn from the areas surrounding the three schools mentioned above. Naturalistic observations were undertaken over three months in communal playgrounds and other social and community settings within the areas under study. This

observation focused on learners' use of language, participation in culturally mediated activities, and interactions with peers and community members. Observations were recorded using detailed field notes that documented both the verbal and non-verbal behaviors of the learners, contextual factors, and researcher reflections. The triangulation of data from these three sources was meant to ensure a richer understanding of the challenges related to identity negotiation that may occur alongside the acquisition of ESL within such a sociocultural context.

In-depth interviews were conducted with community leaders and parents using a semi-structured interview guide. This allowed participants to describe their perceptions of learners' cultural identity and their experiences with ESL. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using transcription software to ensure accuracy and data integrity. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-stage process was followed. Reflexivity was maintained by keeping reflective memos and acknowledging the researcher's positionality, particularly as an insider-outsider in the rural community context.

The ethical considerations were rigorously observed. Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, school heads, and local community leadership. This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical rules and regulations prescribed by Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education which is the major gatekeeper of these levels of education. Permission to conduct the research was sought to conduct the study in Murewa District of Mashonaland East Province and it was obtained. All established protocols were strictly observed to ensure the protection of participants throughout the study. The researcher ensured adherence to several key ethical principles, which were central to safeguarding participants and maintaining the integrity of the study. Informed consent was sought from all participants to ensure that they voluntarily agree to participate, fully understanding the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the research. Consent had clear explanations of the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and right to withdraw at any time. This protects participants' autonomy and allows them to make a conscious decision to take part. Avoidance of harm was strictly observed, ensuring that participants were not exposed to any physical, psychological, or social risk because of their involvement in the study. This principle safeguards participants' well-being and promotes ethical responsibility. For the naturalistic observation of learners, anonymity was ensured by not recording identifying details, and parental consent was obtained for observing children within their community contexts. In this study, there was no conflict of interest.

FINDINGS

From the analysis of the data obtained from in-depth interviews with selected community members and the naturalistic observations of primary school children within their communities in Murewa District, various intersecting themes emerged, three of which are discussed below. These findings reflect both the participants' perceptions and the researcher's observations, highlighting the complex dynamics between English language learning and the cultural identity negotiation that learners experience through their learning and use of a second language.

INTERGENERATIONAL TENSIONS

A key insight from the study is the intergenerational tension that arises when younger learners embrace English in ways that community members may perceive as distancing themselves from cultural norms. Participant responses and researcher observations of the learners in their home and social settings indicate that the learning of English-exposed children to cultural values and practices that older members of the community may perceive as conflict with their local rural context. Some of the participants' responses indicated that they had noticed changing notions of respect and behavior in some of their children. This sometimes leads to tension with elders who uphold traditional norms and are custodians of cultural values. For instance, in response to a question as to whether they had noticed any changes in cultural behavior or appreciation of cultural practices in their children, the more they acquired the English language, five participants in the in-depth interviews reported witnessing generational tensions. They noted that some older community members perceived the young ESL primary school learners as challenging culturally established behaviors. These responses suggest that the reverence that these older members hold for their indigenous cultural values often

causes them to perceive the learners as behaving in ways that they consider inappropriate. P4 particularly mentioned issues to do with the "modern" way young children are dressing these days that replicate their exposure to global fashion trends because of their "Englishness."

One elderly participant shared her view on this:

These days, after children learn English, they don't want to wear our traditional attire during ceremonies. They prefer Western clothes, and some of them feel ashamed of participating in our traditional dances. [P5]

Our research observations corroborated these reports. During local ceremonies, such as the Mhande dance and rainmaking rituals, some primary school learners wore contemporary Western-style clothes. Others, however, adhered to the traditional attire fit for the occasion.

Additionally, observations made by the researchers of the young ESL learners in community contexts showed that children occasionally responded in English during interactions with their elders and peers, which traditionally occurs in Shona. These observations revealed that the enthusiasm expressed by some young children to use English when participating in local cultural activities sometimes led to friction with older members of the community. This was especially when English was used in traditional settings largely reserved for Shona. In the interviews, P9 lamented that

I've seen some children respond in English even when they are spoken to in Shona. This is worrying because our children are struggling to balance the use of Shona and English in different spaces.

Another participant spoke about how even traditional ways of greeting older members of the community are being disrespected by some of the children who greet older people in the same manner as they would do their friends. In the in-depth interviews, one participant remarked:

Learning English is not just about acquiring a language; it introduces new ways of thinking, dressing, and interacting, which sometimes challenge the traditional values deeply cherished by the elders in our community. [P7]

These criticisms illustrated above are indicative of some sort of disapproval of such behavior by children. They signify the generational tensions that occur between different age groups as a result of ESL learning in rural contexts by the young, as learning a language implies learning its culture as well. These findings reflect a deeper sociocultural tension in which language acquisition operates as a conduit for ideological shift, positioning younger learners within emergent global identities that implicitly contest localized norms. The perceived "disrespect" may therefore be less about behavioral decline and more about a misalignment between evolving identity frameworks and static cultural expectations, revealing a generational gap in meaning-making systems. Implicit in the children's choice in the use of the second language even when speaking with older members of their community and in local cultural activities is a notable shift in these children's cultural self-perception in the post-English acquisition stage.

Language Driven Social Self Positioning

Observations also showed differences in participation levels in certain communal activities. Some children who appeared more proficient in English took less time than those who predominantly used Shona. In a few instances observed, the former seemed hesitant to engage in events and ceremonies that involved elaborate displays of local culture. In contrast, children primarily using Shona appeared to be more active participants, with some assuming leadership roles in cultural activities such as traditional dances.

Responses from community members generally supported these observations, with several participants noting that children's level of participation in traditional community events seemed to be linked to their perceived English proficiency. This pattern suggests that language proficiency functions as a form of symbolic capital that restructures social participation, where English competence becomes a gatekeeping mechanism influencing access to certain social spaces while simultaneously restricting engagement in others. This dual role reinforces unequal participation patterns rooted in linguistic hierarchies.

For instance, in response to a question on whether they had seen any changes in the way their children interacted with their parents, family, or community, the more they learned English, a community leader explained:

Those who speak mostly Shona are more involved in our cultural events like storytelling sessions and dance. The ones who prefer English seem to drift away from these activities. [P9]

Some participants suggested that with some of the children, the more proficient they became in English, the more they seemed to distance themselves from participating in traditional cultural practices. One community member stated the following.

These days, after children learn English, they don't want to wear our traditional attire during ceremonies. They prefer Western clothes, and are sometimes not keen in participating in our traditional dances. [P5]

Observations of the children during playtime also revealed that their use of English varied depending on group composition and type of activity. Children who are more proficient in English often form smaller, more exclusive groups in which English predominates, particularly during organized games or role-playing scenarios drawn from school contexts. Within the larger groups, the children mainly spoke in Shona as they engaged in traditional games and songs. In the latter group, English typically emerged only when they were practising specific school-related activities, such as recital content learned in class through song and play.

When asked whether they thought that learning English had affected their children's sense of belonging to the community, the analysis of the participants' responses indicated that some of them believed that the level of English proficiency their individual children had could influence their social interactions within the community. Seven of the nine community members interviewed suggested that children with higher English proficiency occasionally isolated themselves from their less proficient peers, reflecting potential feelings of disconnection to their peers. Rather than mere social withdrawal, this behavior may indicate strategic identity positioning, where learners align themselves with perceived higher-status linguistic groups to accumulate social and academic advantages. This highlights how language choice is both performative and instrumental within peer dynamics. One parent noted:

Certain children who speak more English tend to stick together, and they tend to mix much less with those who struggle with the language. [P3].

Similarly, observations made of primary school ESL learners within their social and cultural contexts within their community witnessed a degree of apprehension and disconnection in how some of them related not only to their peers but also to other community members. In this regard, perceived social distancing may be linked to children's perception that proficiency in English confers higher status or symbolic prestige within the community. This perception may influence peer relationships and social inclusion, reflecting a subtle hierarchy generated from perceived linguistic capital. This hierarchy underscores the internalization of broader societal ideologies that equate English with prestige and upward mobility, suggesting that even at primary level, learners reproduce macro-level power structures within micro-level interactions. Such dynamics complicate notions of inclusion and belonging within rural community settings. The observations revealed that although the children did not necessarily abandon local traditions outright, there was evidence of selectively negotiated participation during play activities based on context and peer networks.

The findings also highlight the social stratification that may emerge around English proficiency. Observations of learner activities in the playgrounds revealed that learners who perceived themselves as being more proficient in English occasionally formed peer cliques, generating subtle social hierarchies. These observations also witnessed the occurrence of tensions between those more proficient in English sometimes being teased for their choice of language during play sessions; there was an instance where a group of children made fun of one of them who seemed to struggle with the language. As an initial interpretation of these observations may suggest exclusion or marginalization among these rural children, the dynamics of these patterns may be understood through Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital and Norton's framework of investment. These scholars suggest that language use becomes both a recourse and a site for negotiating social positioning and

identity within peer networks (Bourdieu, 1991; Norton, 2014). Both their views are elaborated upon in the discussion section below.

English As a Vehicle for Academic and Professional Success

Significantly, in the in-depth interviews, participants' responses to questions on how learning English affects children's cultural identity revealed that they held ambivalent views. While English was primarily viewed as a vehicle for educational and professional advancement, concerns emerged regarding its influence on children's attachment to Shona culture and language. The participants recognized that English proficiency is essential for academic success and future employment opportunities. This is evident from the responses below: One participant stated the following:

English is important for their future. If they don't speak it well, they won't be able to pass their exams or compete for jobs. [P5]

Another community member said;

We want them to succeed, but we also want them to respect their roots. It's difficult to balance because if they don't speak English, they may struggle, yet if they forget Shona, they lose a part of themselves. [P6]

These perspectives point to community members' recognition that without the necessary level of English proficiency, their children would be at a disadvantage in these aspects of life. Their responses reflect how the community perceives the pragmatic functions of English. This ambivalence illustrates a tension between instrumental and integrative motivations for language learning, where English is valued for its economic utility but simultaneously feared for its cultural implications. This dual perception reveals the community's negotiation between survival within global systems and preservation of localized identity frameworks.

The Threat to The Preservation of Indigenous Cultural Identity

Six participants in the in-depth interviews expressed apprehension that increasing English proficiency could erode learners' cultural identity. This suggests that emphasis on English in primary schools may inadvertently diminish children's engagement with the Shona language, proverbs, and cultural practices. Responses show that this challenge was responsible for the reshaping of learners' sense of cultural identity, as English dominance somehow affected the maintenance of these learners' sense of belonging to their community and appreciation of their local language, culture, and indigenous knowledge systems. A participant noted:

Our children are losing their cultural identity, and they no longer speak our language the way we did growing up. Our language carries our history, our wisdom, and our identity. If they lose it, they lose part of who they are. [P8]

Another participant also expressed the following sentiment:

In our time, language was sacred, and it tied us to our culture. Now the children speak English as if our language has no value, and they don't even know some of our proverbs, and that's how we pass wisdom.

These concerns suggests that learners continually reconstruct their identities as they navigate multiple cultural and linguistic spaces. Thus, these findings highlight the complex interplay between linguistic competence, identity formation, and cultural preservation. Importantly, these concerns may reflect not only actual cultural erosion but also an anxiety rooted in perceived shifts in authority over knowledge transmission as younger generations access alternative epistemologies through English. This suggests that the perceived "loss" of culture may also signal a redistribution of cultural ownership and voice.

DISCUSSION

One of the main themes that emerged from this study was that of the intergenerational tensions that sometimes occurred between the older generation in the community and young primary school ESL learners. A significant

concern is that such conflicts and strains between the older and younger generation, specifically in rural contexts, may inadvertently disrupt the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous knowledge. Scholars such as Hausknecht et al. (2021) have raised this fear, as they highlight how foreign language education may foster disinterest among younger generations toward traditional knowledge, potentially hindering the continuity of indigenous knowledge systems. In African societies, intergenerational transfer of knowledge is crucial for the continuity of indigenous epistemologies, traditions, and cultural practices. Indigenous knowledge encompasses cultural norms, social values, and environmental understanding, all of which contribute to a community's identity. The preservation of indigenous knowledge relies on language and successful intergenerational transmission methods, as these ensure the continuity of cultural and environmental information, which may otherwise be lost (Mumpande et al., 2020). Hausknecht et al. (2021) suggest that the marginalization of local languages may lead to the gradual fading of indigenous knowledge elements, reducing their richness and, in extreme cases, erasing them from collective memory. As younger rural generations adopt English, they may inadvertently challenge the traditional norms and values upheld by older generations, leading to tension between the two. Findings from this study give evidence to this as it shows that as the primary school children in Murewa District generally embraced English as a marker of progress and modernity, it sometimes lead to frictions with older generations who viewed the enthusiasm for the language as commensurate to a departure from cultural norms. The differing expectations across generations regarding the role of English present significant challenges for children.

Understanding the effects of learning English as a second language on the intergenerational transfer of indigenous knowledge is therefore critical, as it involves psychosocial dimensions. From a poststructural perspective, ESL acquisition did not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it interacts with family practices, communal participation, and cultural continuity, shaping how children negotiate their identity, confidence, and sense of belonging in bilingual or multilingual settings.

Shava (2019) argues that the colonial and Western formal education systems that continue to dominate the Global South have historically prioritized global languages and decontextualized indigenous knowledge forms. This trend often culminates in the marginalization of indigenous knowledge, as alluded to by community members in the interviews. Families, as primary transmitters of cultural values, linguistic skills, and identity, offer the first context in which children internalize these practices prior to encountering English in formal education. When English is introduced as a medium of instruction at the primary school level in Zimbabwe, it often shifts the children's linguistic environment, influencing not only their academic engagement, but also their perception of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. This influence may have profound effects on both individual and collective identity formations. In rural contexts, such as Murewa District, this may have negative implications for children's sense of belonging, confidence, and psychosocial well-being. Children who experience disruptions in the intergenerational flow of indigenous knowledge may have a diminished sense of cultural belonging to the community.

Home setting becomes significant in minimizing this possible effect by ensuring cultural continuity. In addition to the family environment, community gatherings, oral narratives, and participatory cultural events play an equally important role in sustaining indigenous knowledge, offering spaces where traditional languages are actively spoken, and cultural norms are reinforced. The interactions bolster resilience against the homogenizing influence of dominant languages such as English, supporting children's social identity and community belonging. Thus, the dynamic interplay between community and family should provide both linguistic and psychosocial scaffolding, which should enable children to maintain connections to their cultural heritage. This would significantly reduce the concerns of the older generation about the cultural dissonance that ESL learning may cause in their young children. These fears that English will erase local culture reflect broader anxieties about language shift and cultural continuity in the context of global English (Makoni & Pennycook, 2020; McKinney, 2017). However, contemporary scholarship on language and identity cautions against framing identity change in terms of simple loss. While some scholars have highlighted potential threats to indigenous culture through ESL learning, including marginalization of local traditions (Abdalgane, 2022; Alfarhan, 2016), it is equally important to recognise positive and ambivalent outcomes. Learning English can empower learners, to expand access to global knowledge and create opportunities for social mobility and intellectual engagement (Adegbija, 2021; Jiang et al., 2020).

The theme that emerged on language driven self-positioning is particularly illuminating. Community members' perceptions and observations made on the formation of language-based cliques suggest that English proficiency may create not just linguistic divides but also social hierarchal ones among children. The social self-positioning experienced by some of the learners in this study reveals that the rural primary school learners' misconception that proficiency in English equates to higher social status fosters an exclusionary environment where those who struggle with the language may be marginalized. This points out to the broader social implications of language learning, where language becomes a marker of identity and shapes peer relationships and social dynamics (Pelaez-Henao, 2024). For instance, Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital indicates that learner competence in a language considered socially valuable, such as English in the context of this study, may confer symbolic power and social prestige, potentially leading to shifts in social alignment among children.

Similarly, Norton's (2015) Investment Theory clearly explains how learners' engagement with second language learning is largely influenced by their own sense of identity and ambitions in the future. Norton argues that what learners invest in the language correlates with their belief in the cultural capital the language may provide them with in relation to social and economic opportunities. The use of English in community settings can be viewed not only as a linguistic practice, but also as an identity statement. When children adjust their language use - downplaying local languages in school or community settings or avoiding English at home to show respect—they are doing what Darvin and Norton (2015) describe as identity investment: strategically aligning with certain identities to gain recognition, safety, or advantage. The tensions reported in the findings among some of the children themselves illustrate how identity negotiation is shaped by unequal power relations, as some ways of speaking and being are legitimized while others are marginalized (Blackledge, Creese & Hu, 2018). The emphasis in Norton's (2015) Investment Theory on the non-static nature of cultural identity is indicative of the evolving sense of cultural identity that ESL learners experience in contemporary rural African contexts. They engage in active identity negotiation, reconfiguring their sociocultural selves within overlapping local and global frameworks. This study has shown that some community members in Murewa District perceive that this negotiation, which in turn, may negatively shape learners' evolving sense of self, belonging, and connection to local social networks. This may also influence their engagement in culturally significant communal activities. This implies that, although ESL acquisition opens access to broader educational and social opportunities for learners, it may simultaneously introduce tensions with regard to community integration.

The post structural perspective emphasises the role of discourse in shaping identity. Discourses around English proficiency, success, and education may frame learners' self-perceptions and how they are perceived by others in their community (Mirzaei & Parhizkar, 2021). The findings of this study show that among the community members, English is widely viewed as a pathway to mobility and a better future. Yet they also expressed fears of the second language as being instrumental in cultural and linguistic erosion. These dual perspectives from the community members reveal that they recognize the practical benefits of English for progress and success - such as, academic achievement and the creation of job opportunities. The community members, however, also expressed a palpable anxiety about the challenges that linguistic proficiency and cultural competence in the language poses for indigenous cultural preservation. Their main concern was that the strengthening of the learners' proficiency in English may translate to the erosion of traditional cultural values as their children may challenges in maintaining the local cultural practices and upholding their indigenous language, both of which are crucial to their community's identity. This reinforces the role of English as a repository of global cultural values, traditions, and worldviews. Despite the advantages that English learning brings with it, also culminates in cultural identity changes (Harras & Ennam, 2023). The dual role necessitates some sort of balancing act as the children are being caught in-between competing expectations, thereby creating a cultural and psychosocial dilemma for these rural learners.

While this implication may frame this as a tension between "modern" English and "traditional" indigenous languages, it may be argued that the identity negotiation that occurs among rural ESL learners is rarely binary. Instead, these learners may be considered instead to be engaging in hybrid practices, by remixing cultural and linguistic resources to construct flexible identities. If these dilemmas are viewed from the poststructuralist approach to language and identity (Norton, 2015; Darvin & Norton, 2017) and from the identity negotiation

theory (Ting-Toomey, 2015; Fang et al., 2018), it can be argued that the rural children's identities as English learners are continuously produced, constrained and renegotiated within intersecting power relations rather than being simply influenced by English in a linear way. Through this process of second language learning, hybrid identities may emerge that allow the learners to integrate aspects of both their indigenous culture and English speaking contexts, resulting in enriched cultural competence as opposed to outright cultural loss. Studies on translanguaging and young learners show that children frequently develop hybrid, "in-between" identities that draw on multiple linguistic and cultural resources (García & Wei, 2018). For instance, the switching between using Shona and English that some children did during cultural activities and play sessions as witnessed in this study highlights the adaptive strategies that these rural children employed to reconcile competing expectations as they actively interact with the worlds they inhabit; they are not just being trapped between them. It can be argued that rather than viewing ESL learning in rural contexts as inherently threatening, it may be more appropriate to conceptualize it as a dynamic process in which learners negotiate, adapt and sometimes reconstruct their cultural identities. In African contexts, particularly in Zimbabwe, this negotiation is influenced by socio-economic factors, exposure to media, the national schooling policies and community practices. El Harras and Ennam (2023) argue that language learning is not just about learning the structure of a foreign or second language, linguistically speaking, but rather also involves the acquisition of the respective culture of the language being learnt. A notable observation from the study was that English proficiency among these children may correlate with a detachment from traditional cultural practices. This implication raises broader concerns about cultural continuity, particularly when the younger generations increasingly favour Western symbols of modernity over their indigenous cultural ones.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

According to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2024), The Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education (2024–2030), the goal of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC) is to foster inclusivity and relevance by emphasizing the incorporation of local culture and context into education. However, insufficient funding, poor teacher preparation, and the predominance of English as the major teaching language frequently make it difficult to apply this strategy in rural areas. Consequently, learners' mother tongues and cultural identities are often ignored, which causes disengagement and subpar academic results. This study investigated the opinions of the community regarding the cultural and psychosocial difficulties encountered by Zimbabwean ESL learners in rural primary schools. This study aimed to discover important issues, contextual factors, and potential solutions by interacting with parents. The results will guide the creation of culturally sensitive English language learning models, supporting inclusive and high-quality education in line with Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy 2 (NDS2) objectives, (Republic of Zimbabwe 2025). By emphasizing the value of community involvement and context-specific strategies in meeting the particular requirements of rural ESL learners, this study seeks to add to continuing conversation on culturally responsive education.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the perspectives of community members in Murewa District regarding some of the challenges related to cultural identity that arise in the context of ESL learning by primary school children in rural contexts. This highlighted their recognition of some of the critical tensions that may arise from the process. The study indicates that exposure to English may contribute to shifting cultural identities among learners, particularly in how they navigate relationships between home, school, and community environments. While English is widely recognised as essential for academic achievement and future opportunities, it is also perceived as potentially contributing to cultural distancing and weakened engagement with indigenous knowledge systems. The findings of the study suggest that rural learners' encounters with ESL may lead to the transformation of their sense of cultural identity. As rural communities embrace the demands of globalization, understanding the dynamics of the cultural identity-related challenges that young ESL learners face during such an ongoing negotiation process is crucial in influencing not only learners' academic success but also ensuring their long-term holistic well-being. Addressing these challenges requires more than linguistic support; it calls for educators and policymakers to ensure that English education in rural contexts is designed so that children can invest in English as a resource for possibility without being required to distance themselves from

their local languages, histories, and communities. This study requires more than linguistic intervention alone. It requires deliberate educational strategies that support bilingualism, strengthen cultural continuity, and promote inclusive pedagogies that allow learners to use English as a resource for opportunity without disconnecting them from their cultural heritage.

LIMITATIONS AND TRANSFERABILITY

While the study provides rich, detailed, and contextually grounded insights into the phenomenon under investigation, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that may influence the interpretation and application of the findings. Firstly, the relatively small sample size (n = 9), although consistent with qualitative research approaches that prioritize depth over breadth inevitably restrict the diversity of perspectives captured. The limited number of participants may not fully represent the wide range of experiences, views, and socio-cultural dynamics present within the broader population. As such, caution should be exercised when attempting to generalize the findings beyond the immediate study group.

Secondly, the study is highly context-specific, being situated within a particular rural setting where English as a Second Language (ESL) education interacts closely with indigenous cultural systems. The unique socio-cultural, linguistic, and educational characteristics of this setting mean that the findings are deeply embedded in that context. Therefore, they should not be interpreted as universally applicable across different geographical regions or educational environments. Variations in cultural norms, institutional frameworks, and language policies in other settings may produce different outcomes.

However, rather than aiming for statistical generalizability, this study contributes to theoretical and analytical transferability. The insights generated can be meaningfully applied to similar contexts, particularly in rural or under-resourced settings where ESL learning is influenced by strong indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices. Readers and researchers are encouraged to assess the extent to which the findings resonate with their own contexts and to draw informed parallels where appropriate.

Furthermore, the study may be subject to potential researcher bias, as is common in qualitative research, where data collection and interpretation are influenced by the researcher's perspectives and interactions with participants. Although efforts were made to ensure credibility and trustworthiness, such as maintaining reflexivity and adhering to ethical research practices, this remains an inherent limitation.

To enhance the robustness and broader applicability of future research, it is recommended that subsequent studies consider expanding the sample size to include a more diverse participant pool. Additionally, incorporating comparative case studies across multiple districts or regions could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ESL education interacts with varying cultural contexts. Such approaches would strengthen the potential for broader applicability while still preserving the depth and richness characteristic of qualitative inquiry.

REFERENCES

1. Abdalgane, M. (2022). The EFL learning process: An examination of the potential of social media. World Journal of English Language, 12(7), 69-75.
2. Ahmed, R. I. (2021). Becoming a Qualitative ESL Researcher: A Personal Monologue. Journal of Language and Education, 7(1 (25), 219-228.
2. Alfarhan, I. (2016). English as a Global Language and the Effects on Culture and Identity. American Research Journal of English and Literature, 2016, 1-6.
3. Amiot, C. E., Doucerain, M. M., Zhou, B., & Ryder, A. G. (2018). Cultural identity dynamics: capturing changes in cultural identities over time and their intraindividual organization. European Journal of Social Psychology, 48(5), 629-644.
4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytical approaches. Counselling and psychotherapy research, 21(1), 37-47.

5. Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. (2018) Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design Choosing among Five Approaches. 4th Edition, SAGE Publications, Inc., Thousand Oaks.
6. Creswell, A. (2013). Both on and under the surface of discourse: Tagged corpora for the functional description of conjunctive language. Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 95, 116-125. 15.
7. Darvin, R. and Norton, B. 2017. Language, identity, and investment in the Twenty-first Century. Language Policy and Political Issues in Education, pp.1-15. Springer International Publishing Inc. DOI:10.1007/978-3-319-02320-5_18-2
8. El Harrad, L & Enham, A. (2023). English Learning and Moroccan EFL Learners' Perceptions towards Their Cultural Identity: Understanding of The Self And The Other. IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 28 (7), 12-23.
9. Harras, E.I. L & Enham, A. (2023). English Learning and Moroccan EFL Learners' Perceptions towards Their Cultural Identity: Understanding of The Self And The Other. IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 28 (7), 12-23.
10. García, O. and l. Wei (2018). Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education. PalgraveMacmillan.
11. Gibbons, P. (2018). Bridging discourses in the ESL classroom.
12. Goldkuhl, G. (2017). Linguistic and Ontological Concept Formation: The LION Method. The Qualitative Report, 27(12).
13. Hausknecht, S., Freeman, S., Martin, J., Nash, C., & Skinner, K. (2021). Sharing Indigenous Knowledge through intergenerational digital storytelling: Design of a workshop engaging the elderly and youth. Educational Gerontology, 47(7), 285-296.
14. Hosain, G. S. (2023). Notions of Identity and Investment in Second Language Acquisition: Bangladeshi indigenous students' perspectives. Journal of NELTA. Vo.28 (1), 48-61.
15. Jiang, L., Yang, M., & Yu, S. (2020). Chinese ethnic minority students' investment in English Learning empowered by digital multimodal composition. Tesol Quarterly, 54(4), 954-979.
16. Khan, S. S. (2020). A narrative literature review of the identity negotiation of bilingual students who are labelled ESL. Interchange, 51(4), 361-383.
17. Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. (2024). The Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education (2024–2030) (Secretary's Circular No. 4 of 2024). Government Printers
18. Mirzaei, A., & Parhizkar, R. (2021). The Interplay of L2 Pragmatics and Learner Identity as a Social, Complex Process: A Poststructuralist Perspective. tesl-ej, 25(1), n1.
19. Mumpande, I. (2020). The revitalisation of Tonga: A case study of an endangered minority language in Zimbabwe [Master's dissertation, University of South Africa]. Unisa Institutional Repository. https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/26766
20. Mupinga, E. E. (2021). Adjustment Experiences of Zimbabwean International Students Studying in the United States.
21. Nhongo, R., & Tshotsho, B. P. (2020). The problematics of language-in-education policies in post-independence Zimbabwe, respectively. Journal of Asian and African Studies, 56(6), 1304-1317.
22. Nikolov, M., & Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (2019). Teaching young language learners. Second handbook of English language teaching, 577-599.
23. Norton B. (2013), Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation (2nd ed.), Bristol, Multilingual Matters.
24. Norton, B. (2014). Identity and poststructuralist theory in SLA. Multiple perspectives on the self in SLA, 1, 59-74.
25. Norton, B. (2015). Investment, identity, and language learning. TESOL Quarterly, 49(4), 827-845.
26. Owusu-Ansah, F. E., & Mji, G. (2013). African indigenous knowledge and research. African Journal of Disability, 2(1), 1-5.
27. Peláez-Henao, O. A. (2024). Poststructural Perspectives in English Teaching in Rural Colombia. Pedagogía y Saberes, (61), 179-193.
28. Pham, C. (2021). English Language Education in Rural Areas: Current Issues, Complexities And Ways Forward. In the VNU Journal of Science Research Education, 37 (4), 39-48.
29. Rahimi Rad M. Mutual Relationship between Foreign language learning and Cultural Identity: A Critical Overview. Int. J. Adv. Stu. Hum. Soc. Sci. 2021; 10(2):77-85

30. Republic of Zimbabwe. (2025). National Development Strategy 2 (2026–2030). Government Printers.
31. Shava, S. (2016). The Application/Role of Indigenous Knowledges in Transforming the Formal Education Curriculum for Contextual and Epistemological Relevance:Cases from Southern Africa. In: Msila, V.T. and Gumbo, M.T. (eds). Africanising the Curriculum: Indigenous Perspectives and Theories. Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 121-139.
32. Shava, S. (2019). Indigenous/tribal Knowledges - Definition and relevance in the Modern era. Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge for the Modern Era: A Natural and Applied Science Perspective. Boca Raton, FL: Taylor & Francis, 1-16.
33. Sibanda, R. & Tshehla, L.P., 2025, 'From mother tongue to English: A language policy shift at a multilingual township school in Gauteng', South African Journal of Childhood Education 15(1), a1598. https://doi.org/ 10.4102/sajce.v15i1.1598
34. Thanh, N. and Thanh, T. (2015). The Interconnection Between Interpretivist Paradigm and Qualitative Methods in Education. American Journal of Educational Science, 1(2), 24-27.
35. Tian, W., & Dumlao, R. P. (2020). Impacts of positioning, power, and resistance on EFL learners' identity construction through classroom interaction: A Perspective from Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis. The Qualitative Report, 25(6), 1436-1460.
36. Vizulete, G. (2022). Language as a repository of cultural values, tradition, and worldviews. Journal of Language and Culture, 1(1), 1-10.
37. Yin, R. K. (2018). Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.