

Acculturation Strategies of Indigenous Students in Learning English: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative descriptive study aimed to identify the factors that contribute to social and psychological distance of indigenous English learners, their strategies to reduce these factors, and their insights about acculturation. To this end, ten indigenous English major students at the University of Mindanao were interviewed. Through thematic analysis, findings revealed that the factors involved in the social distance of the participants were incongruence and dissimilarity between 2LL and TL group, negative attitudinal orientation towards the TL group, and cohesiveness of the 2LL group, while the psychological factors were language shock, high affective filter, and ego permeability. To address these factors, the participants implemented the following strategies: positive intergroup relationship, accommodation of the TL, perceptual distortions in favor of outgroup vitality, cultivation of positive self-image, and development of TL skills. In terms of the insights of the participants, this study observed empowerment of indigenous community, enhancement of exposure to second language input, instructional scaffolding in L2 teaching, implementation of intercultural approach, immersion to the outgroup, and alleviation of affective filter. The results evinced how the acculturation dilemmas faced by indigenous English learners prevented effective second language acquisition. From this, appropriate solutions may be formulated to ensure successful acculturation in the classroom.

Keywords: *acculturation; descriptive qualitative; indigenous learners; social and psychological distance; in-depth and focus group discussion; Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Many students from different cultural backgrounds have taken an interest in learning English. In the process of scrutinizing its linguistic elements, they also become exposed to the cultural elements embedded within it. For indigenous English learners, this means that becoming proficient in English entails undergoing a process called acculturation, which means learning the culture of the people who use the target language. However, as they expose themselves to a new culture, several factors hinder them from acculturating. These include strong ingroup identification, anxiety brought about by the lack of ingroup support, and rejection from members of the target language group (Wilches et al., 2018; Makhanya & Zibane, 2020; Ahn, 2017). Undoubtedly, these problems amplify indigenous English learners' difficulties in learning the English language.

The problem above is consistent with Wilches et al., (2018), stating that many indigenous students resist learning the English language in favor of preserving their ethnolinguistic identity. This refusal to accept a foreign culture to maintain one's cultural origin is a phenomenon in acculturation called "separation" (Lamar, 2018; Han et. al., 2016). It is found that, despite being in an environment where English is necessary, indigenous and non-native speakers of the target language often separate themselves because of cultural pride and patriotism (Liu & Dong, 2019; Zakarneh, 2018). Furthermore, Makhanya and Zibane (2020) found that indigenous people often refuse to enroll in English courses due to their negative perception of the English language, describing it as irrelevant to the indigenous people's lives. Some indigenous learners also see the English language as a "threat" to their identity, especially since they are forced to comply with the social rules of the dominant cultural group (Charness & Chen, 2020; Ghebrekidan, 2018; Vicente, 2019).

Meanwhile, Ahn (2017) discovered that acculturating with an entirely different culture without some form of support from co-indigenous groups also exacerbates the stress that indigent students already face when making cross-cultural contacts. This is because social bonds with individuals from the same cultural background become an avenue for indigenous students to exchange their thoughts and experiences; hence, helping each other develop acceptable behaviors in the dominant culture (Li, 2022; Kojima, 2020). Without this type of support system, feelings of alienation are intensified (Ma et al., 2020; Lamar, 2018), consequently causing anxiety among indigenous students. When students become too anxious, they opt not to interact with the target culture for fear of committing mistakes due to their lack of cultural familiarity (Araujo, 2020; Zhang, 2020).

Regardless of the fact that there have been relatively few studies on the acculturation experiences of indigenous students (Wilches et al., 2018; Liu & Dong, 2019; Charness and Chen, 2020), we have not encountered studies that address the factors that contribute to the social and psychological distance of indigenous English learners and the strategies used to reduce the said problems on their acculturation experience. Also, most of the studies in acculturation involve international students migrating to foreign countries to pursue formal education. What separates this study from other studies is that it considers the strategies enforced in the acculturation process of indigenous students without having to physically immigrate to the target language community. Since the degree of learning English is influenced by the degree of acculturation, it is essential to delve into the acculturation strategies used by indigenous students in learning the language. Focusing on this idea will create appropriate support and guidance that is essential for the effective learning development of the students.

The completion of this study is of help to provide reference to the circumstances that hold indigenous English major students back from acculturating with the target language and the strategies they employ to prevent such problems. Moreover, this study explains the various acculturation strategies of indigenous learners. With this, professors can provide necessary and appropriate aid to help students feel at ease in

acculturation. This then entails curriculum integration, which could be done by providing activities that will empower indigenous English learners through target language instruction.

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that influence the social and psychological distance of indigenous students learning English at the University of Mindanao, as well as their acculturative strategies for reducing the impact of these factors. Moreover, it aims to unveil the insights of the indigenous English learners about their acculturation experiences. It is important to note that in the context of this study, acculturation ensued through formal instruction of the target language and communication with native English speakers within the locality of indigenous learners. As such, the scope of this study is limited to the acculturation experiences of ten indigenous students taking up English courses at the University of Mindanao.

METHOD

This section presents the research design used in the study. This encompasses the selection of the participants, research instruments, and procedures to be undertaken in the study.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, following Creswell's definition that focuses on describing individual behaviors, perceptions, beliefs, life experiences, and social phenomena through an inquisitive approach. This design was chosen to investigate the factors contributing to social and psychological distance among participants and the strategies for reducing these distances, aiming to gather information from individuals who have direct experience with the phenomenon.

Research Participants

The participants of this study were ten (10) indigenous English major students from different year levels at the University of Mindanao. Each participant was coded with a unique nickname, ranging from ST1 to ST10, to ensure anonymity while facilitating effective data analysis and reporting. Moreover, purposive sampling was realized in this study.

Research Instruments

Data collection for this study involved unstructured interviews guided by an interview guide containing central qualitative questions and sub-questions, validated by a pool of experts for credibility. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with indigenous students to explore their strategies for learning English, employing digital platforms like Zoom and MS Teams for efficient interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings of the acculturation experiences, strategies, and insights of indigenous English major students in learning English. These are presented using themes derived from the responses of the participants with detailed analyses and supporting literature to answer the three research questions.

Factors that Contribute to Social and Psychological Distance in the Acculturation Experiences of Indigenous Students

Social distance in second language learning refers to the proximity between the learner's group and the target language group (Ahamefule, 2019) while psychological distance involves the cognitive gap caused by negative emotions that hinder engagement with the target language and impede language proficiency progress (Nuri, 2018). Based on the thematic analysis conducted, as shown below, several social and psychological factors were found. The factors that were identified to have contributed to the social distance between indigenous English students and the target language group are incongruence and dissimilarity between the 2LL and TL group, negative attitudinal orientation towards the TL group, and cohesiveness of the 2LL group. Meanwhile, the factors that were found to have influenced the psychological distance of indigenous English learners were language shock, high affective filter, and ego permeability.

Table 1. Factors that Contribute to Social and Psychological Distance in the Acculturation Experiences of Indigenous Students

Organizing Themes	Global Themes
SOCIAL FACTORS	
Language barrier	Incongruence and Dissimilarity between 2LL and TL group
Cultural differences	
Negative reception of the TL in the indigenous community	Negative Attitudinal Orientation Towards TL Group
Superiority of the TL group	
Strong bonds with the ethnic group	Cohesiveness of 2LL group
Preference in the native language	
PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS	
Linguistic disorientation with the TL	Language Shock
Sociolinguistic disorientation with the TL	
Low self-efficacy in learning L2	High Affective Filter

Anxiety of meeting social standards in TL use	
Feelings of animosity against the TL group	
Strong in-group identification	Ego Permeability

Factors that contribute to Social Distance

Incongruence and Dissimilarity Between 2LL and TL Group. This pertains to the lack of shared cultural values, social norms, and linguistic elements between the target and second language groups (Falavarjani & Yeh, 2018). In this study, this is catalyzed by unfamiliar vocabulary of the target language (ST1 and ST9), differences in word formation and syntactical rules (ST6), unfamiliar linguistic elements of the target language (ST10), difference in writing systems (ST5), cultural intricacies (ST6 and ST7), and contrasting cultural beliefs (ST3 and ST10). These factors have reportedly made it extremely difficult for the participants to establish mutual understanding and facilitate intergroup communication with the target language group. For instance, ST5 disclosed that the language used by his tribe, the Sama Tribe, has adopted letters from the Arabic script. Hence, tribal characters such as “ح” have no equivalent in the English language. As such, differences in letter symbols make it much harder for members of both groups to communicate if neither group possess phonemic awareness of the other language. This is consistent with the findings of Leano et al. (2019) which showed that as a result of linguistic incongruences, indigenous learners struggle to participate even in classroom-level engagements with the target language group. On the other hand, ST3 and ST10 cited cultural elements in the target language group that may be unfavorable to indigenous tribes, further accentuating social distance. Williams (2019) asserted that when second language learners possess attitudes, beliefs, and views that oppose the target language group, a phenomenon called cultural clash may occur. When that happens, intergroup interactions become negative and possibly hostile, leading to greater social distance.

Negative Attitudinal Orientation Towards TL Group. This refers to the unfavorable perception of the second language group towards the target language group (Abdelkader & Amine, 2017). These negative opinions may be formed due to the influence of their ingroup (ST5, ST9, ST7, and ST1) or unpleasant personal experiences with the target language group (ST7, ST1, ST2, ST5, ST9, ST4, ST3, and ST10). Most notably, ST3 shared one instance where she experienced name calling from members of the target language group simply because of her indigenous background. She then confessed that such derogatory remarks dissuaded her from associating herself with the target language group. Findor et al. (2020) validates this response by stating that there are personal stereotypes from language learners formed by their past experiences, current motivations, and outside influences. Moreover, in a study by Macintyre and Vincze (2017), it is evident that the second language learner’s

responses to language learning vary depending on their background and personality traits, such as, for example, how they view the target language group in comparison to their own. If their opinions of the target language group are predominantly negative, they are less likely to engage with them.

Cohesiveness of 2LL Group. This refers to the tightly-bound intragroup relationship among members of the second language learner's group (Pinnegar & Teemant, 2019). This is manifested through a strong sense of ethnic pride (ST3 and ST9), participation of exclusive cultural activities (ST7 and ST4), and the tendency to favor the language of the ingroup (ST2, ST10, and ST6). Responses of the participants showed that their deep-rooted bond with their cultural group has compromised their desire to initiate contact with the target language group. In fact, ST3 shared that she spends more time advocating for her tribe's interests, while ST6 revealed that he speaks in Bisaya to match the linguistic profiles of his ethnic tribe. Since both participants are preoccupied with pandering to their cultural identities, this may mean lesser opportunities for them to engage with the target language group (Seah, 2018; Savini, 2021). Furthermore, Schumann (1986) outlined in his theory of acculturation that the greater the degree of attachment learners have towards their ingroup, the greater the social distance between the TL and 2LL group.

Factors that contribute to Psychological Distance

Language Shock. This relates to feelings of uncertainty, confusion, or anxiety that second language learners experience upon encountering unfamiliar linguistic elements (Moutafov, 2018). In the context of this study, language shock is distinguished by confusion of linguistic properties in the TL (ST2, ST3, ST5, and ST9) and unfamiliarity of sociolinguistic nuances such as slang, colloquialisms, and accents (ST1 and ST5). For instance, ST3 stated that she had trouble understanding the difference between the words "you're" and "your", especially since homophones are rarely encountered in her native language. This understandably made her develop feelings of distress and anxiety while learning the target language. A similar case was unveiled by Sankaravelayuthan (2020). In his study, it was discovered that second language learners whose native language is Tamil are more likely to encounter linguistic disorientation when learning English due to its untranslatability or lexical gaps. Sociolinguistic disorientation is another contributing factor to language shock, as Abolfzali and Sagedhi (2017) professed. According to them, colloquial expressions, slang, jokes, and idioms are often the main factors that inhibit the ability of second language learners to relate to and understand members of the target language group.

High Affective Filter. A high affective filter is described as a 'mental block' that obstructs target language input from being processed and understood by the learner (Verhey, 2019). This is indicated by low self-confidence (ST4, ST9, ST2), pessimistic attitude when encountering challenging aspects of the target language (ST6), anxiety of meeting expectations in using the TL (ST7 and ST8), and fear of judgement when using the TL (ST4 and ST9). When these factors are present, second language learners

become apprehensive towards the target language, inhibiting them from equipping the necessary knowledge and skills to become competent in the target language (Zhang, 2022). In fact, a study done by Bao and Liu (2021) showed that regardless of how much exposure to meaningful and comprehensive linguistic inputs these students receive, for as long as the affective filter is up, second language learning will be repressed.

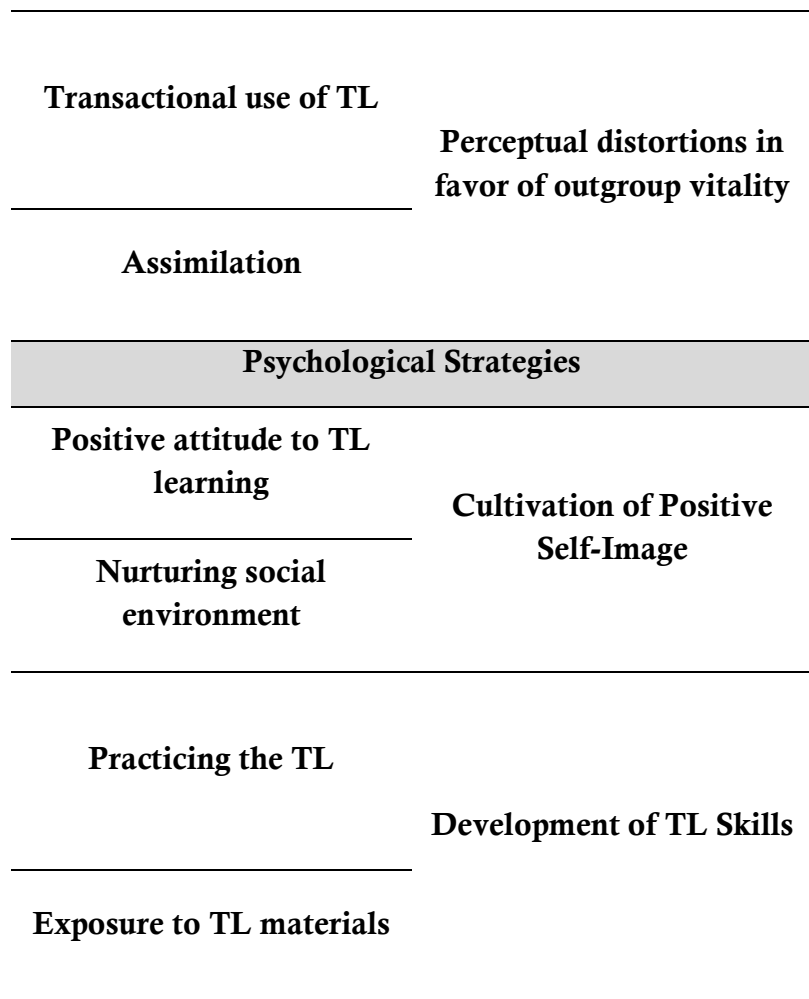
Ego Permeability. The study addresses the willingness of second language learners to adjust their cultural and linguistic boundaries to accommodate the target language group, as described by Zakarneh (2018). Participants were found to have rigid cultural and linguistic egos, as exemplified by ST7, ST4, and ST8, who harbored negative feelings towards the target language group, leading to demotivation for language learning. Additionally, ST7 and ST3 exhibited strong in-group identification, valuing their cultural group over the target language, which can hinder effective language acquisition. This aligns with Halse's (2018) proposition that a stronger affiliation with the native group can reduce motivation to integrate with the target language group.

Acculturation Strategies to Reduce Social and Psychological Distance of Indigenous English Learners

As illustrated in table 2 below, several acculturation strategies were identified based on the thematic analysis conducted. In reducing the social distance of indigenous English learners, this study found that positive intergroup relationships, accommodation of the target language, and perceptual distortions in favor of outgroup vitality were employed. On the other hand, in reducing psychological distance, the learners cultivated a positive self-image and developed target language skills.

Table 2. Acculturation Strategies Used by Indigenous Students to Reduce Social and Psychological Distance

Organizing Themes	Global Themes
Social Strategies	
Acceptance between TL and 2LL group	Positive intergroup relationship
Integration of 2LL to TL group	
Context-sensitive use of L2	Accommodation of the target language
Increased exposure to TL	



Positive Intergroup Relationship. This refers to the positive interactions between individuals in different social groups and interactions taking place between the groups collectively (Rambaud et al., 2021). It is manifested through mutual respect between TL and 2LL group (ST3 and ST5) and willingness of the indigenous learner to establish connection with the target language group (ST4 and ST6). For instance, ST6 shared that he would gladly act as a translator for those who cannot speak or understand the target language so that members of his ethnic community would not feel overwhelmed when attempting to interact with the target language group. In this case, it is evident that the participant is eager to bridge the social gap between his ethnic group and the group of the target language. When indigenous learners possess this kind of attitude, it becomes easier for them to initiate friendship-oriented interactions with members of the target language group. As a result, learners feel become motivated to fully integrate themselves into the target language community (Smith, 2018). Meanwhile, Houdlette (2018) stipulated that in order for integration to become successful, second language learners and members of the target language group must continue to work together to create a harmonious relationship and understand each other on a deeper level.

Accommodation of the Target Language. Participants emphasize the importance of recognizing the value of the target language and actively welcoming it in the community (Sung, 2022). They employ this strategy by using the target language in context-sensitive situations (ST8, ST7, ST9, and ST6), such as when communicating with foreign clients or presenting class reports in English. This aligns with Xie's (2017) findings, which showed that Chinese students who used the target language in various interactions had greater opportunities to enhance their proficiency. Additionally, participants aim to increase exposure to the target language within their indigenous groups (ST6 and ST5), expressing a desire to teach it to their communities for their benefit (Wilches et al., 2018), which ultimately makes the language feel less foreign.

Perceptual Distortions in Favor of Outgroup Vitality. This refers to the process of viewing the target language group as more important and valuable than one's own group (Clement & Norton, 2020). In this study, such a strategy is implemented through perceiving the target language as a tool to unlocking career opportunities (ST1), access to academic resources (ST5), achieving personal goals (ST2), and boosting social mobility of their ingroup (ST6). Aside from that, it is also manifested by renouncing one's cultural roots in favor of adopting the target language group's culture (ST9 and ST2). Indeed, when second language learners deem the target language as more vital than their native tongue, they become more invested in adopting the values, traditions, and norms practiced by speakers of that language (Joy & Gopal, 2017).

Cultivation of Positive Self-Image. This refers to the process of fostering a healthy and desirable mental picture that second language learners have of themselves (Kotkot, 2019). In this case, being receptive to feedback from "more-knowledgeable-others" (MKO) (ST2 and ST1), becoming enthusiastic about learning the target language (ST3), ignoring malicious criticisms from other people (ST1), and surrounding oneself with supportive peers (ST6, ST8, and ST7) manifest this strategy. The effectiveness of this strategy is reinforced by Chen (2022), who found that Chinese students who view themselves positively as language learners were more likely to take the initiative in increasing their metalinguistic awareness and employing metacognitive strategies to improve their target language skills. Abdelkader and Amine (2017) echoed the same sentiment about attitude as a predictor of second language learners' decisions, behaviors, and activities. If they view target language learning as a source of emotional distress and anxiety, second language learners may opt to distance themselves from the language.

Development of Target Language Skills. This refers to the process of enhancing one's knowledge and capabilities in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical structure, and communication (Habok & Magyar, 2018). Participants employ this strategy by consistently using the target language (ST2, ST3, ST5, and ST9) and consuming materials such as books, movies, and videos that contain authentic linguistic input (ST9, ST3, and ST10). Developing target language skills among second language learners has been found to be an indicator of success in intergroup communication and

high levels of self-efficacy (Rofiah et al., 2020). This is because basic reading, speaking, writing, and listening skills allow second language learners to express themselves effectively; thus, making it more efficient for them to express themselves to the target language group with lower stress and anxiety levels (Alam et al., 2021; Abdumalikova, 2020).

Insights Shared by Indigenous English Major Students in their Acculturation Experiences and Strategies

Based on the thematic analysis conducted, this study deduced several insights that the participants shared for teachers, school administrators, ethnic communities, and fellow indigenous English learners to consider when engaging with the target language. As shown in Table 3, these are empowerment of indigenous communities, enhancement of exposure to second language input, instructional scaffolding in L2 teaching, implementation of intercultural approach, immersion to the outgroup, and alleviation of affective filter.

Table 3. Insights Shared by Indigenous English Major Students

Organizing Themes	Global Themes
Strengthening indigenous representation	Empowerment of indigenous community
Academic engagement of indigenous students	
Early TL Instruction	Enhancement of Exposure to Second Language Input
Engage in TL materials	
Accessible TL education to ethnic communities	
Instructional support to 2LL	Instructional Scaffolding in L2 Teaching
Leniency to indigenous 2LL in TL classrooms	
Promotion of Cultural	
	Implementation of

Competence	Intercultural Approach
Functional Interdependence Between the Development of L1 and L2 Skills	
Bilingual and Bicultural TL Teachers	
Positive reception of TL in ethnic group	Immersion to the outgroup
Engagement with the TL group	
Intrinsic motivation	Alleviation of Affective Filter
Permeable Language Ego	

Empowerment of Indigenous Community. Participants underscore the importance of integrating and promoting the indigenous community, advocating for increased visibility in various societal domains (ST9 and ST3) and an indigenized curriculum for ethnic community members learning English (ST2, ST6, and ST4). This recognition and inclusion in academia are motivating factors for indigenous learners, consistent with research by Vanegas et al. (2016). It's vital for target language teachers, as per Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017), to create a comfortable environment that fosters engagement among indigenous students.

Enhancement of Exposure to Second Language Input. This pertains to the enrichment of available resources and services that facilitates the development of second language skills (Stringer, 2018). This could be realized by introducing the target language to indigenous persons at an early age (ST4, ST10, and ST2), providing more target language materials to ethnic communities (ST1 and ST9), and making available various school programs or events aimed at helping indigenous English learners (ST10, ST2, and ST6). According to Supriyono, Dewi, and Saputra (2020), exposure to the target language's culture helps language learners get a deeper knowledge of the language. With this, learners are less likely to be reluctant to explore or avoid the target language.

Instructional Scaffolding in L2 Teaching. Participants stress the importance of assisting second language learners in achieving language proficiency goals by collaborating with more knowledgeable others (MKOs) based on Gallagher's (2020) framework. Strategies include customized teaching methods (ST10, ST4, ST7, and ST8), addressing language and culture shock (ST9), and permitting code-switching in class (ST1 and ST2). These approaches help learners overcome challenges, aligning with Asgari, Ketabi, and Amirian's (2019) findings on tailored instructional materials, and the idea that allowing L1 usage in class discussions, as suggested by Alshammary (2011, cited by Almohaimeed and Almurshed, 2018), can enhance participation.

Implementation of Intercultural Approach. This refers to exchanging cultural information among members of different cultural groups through target language instruction to foster interconnectedness and mutual understanding (Achieng, 2021). In this study, participants proclaimed that possessing intercultural awareness and sensitivity (ST3, ST9, and ST7), extending first language competency to the target language (ST6, ST1, ST5, and ST10), and having bicultural/bilingual teachers (ST1 and ST6) are some effective ways to reduce social and psychological distance. This is affirmed by Byram and Wagner (2018), who stated that the implementation of intercultural approach is important if we are to prevent conflicts and misunderstandings from ensuing between the TL and 2LL group.

Immersion to the Outgroup. Becoming involved in the target language group is essential for second language learners, as it entails gaining approval from their community for their language learning goals (ST7, ST4, ST8, and ST5) and actively immersing themselves in the target language group's norms, culture, and language (ST6 and ST4). This involvement is believed to enhance the success of the acculturation process. Al-halawachy (2018) supports this, emphasizing that immersion stimulates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of learning, exposing learners to meaningful linguistic input, fostering cultural understanding and tolerance, and allowing them to showcase their language skills, resulting in well-rounded learning (Nishimura & Umeda, 2016).

Alleviation of Affective Filter. This refers to maintaining a positive attitude or outlook when learning the target language (Spina, 2021). In this study, participants posited that affective filter can only be alleviated when learners are intrinsically motivated (ST9, ST8, and ST10), receptive to constructive feedback (ST2), and resilient amid difficulties they encounter while learning (ST6 and ST10). This is confirmed by Dincer and Yesilyurt (2017), who stated that, second language learners must be willing to perform tasks to attain target language proficiency, be confident in their ability to complete these tasks, and have a supportive and positive social circle. When these are satisfied by the individual's social milieu, the individual becomes more motivated to act and shows greater positive outcomes in the education setting.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the social and psychological factors hindering the successful acculturation of indigenous English major students. It identifies factors contributing to social distance, including incongruence with the target language group, negative attitudes towards that group, and cohesiveness within the native language group. Psychological distance is influenced by language shock, a high affective filter, and ego permeability. The study suggests strategies such as fostering positive intergroup relationships, accommodating the target language, cultivating a positive self-image, and developing language skills to reduce the impact of these factors. It emphasizes that language and culture are closely intertwined, underscoring the importance of cultural awareness in language learning. Neglecting cultural literacy in target language instruction may hinder proficiency, and understanding the cultural identities of second language learners is crucial to effective pedagogical practices.

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