


EXPLORING YOUNG VOLUNTEERS' EXPERIENCES IN TEACHING ENGLISH VOCABULARY TO IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN MALAYSIA

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: January 22, 2026 Revised: February 19, 2026 Accepted: March 31, 2026 Published: April 30, 2026</p> <p>Keywords: Immigrant Children Vocabulary Young Volunteers</p>	<p>Children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia often face limited access to formal education due to legal and social constraints. This condition highlights the importance of non-formal education supported by young volunteers. This study explores the experiences of Indonesian young volunteers in teaching English vocabulary to immigrant children at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) within a temporary learning environment. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed through semi-structured interviews with four volunteers aged 16–21 years. The data were analyzed thematically to identify volunteers' motivations, teaching strategies, and challenges. The findings indicate that volunteers were motivated by social contribution and personal development. Game-based activities, storytelling, and simple rewards effectively increased children's participation and engagement. However, volunteers encountered challenges related to limited facilities, physical fatigue, and classroom management. Overall, the involvement of young volunteers had a positive impact on the learning process of immigrant children and contributed to the volunteers' social and emotional development.</p> <p><i>This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA license.</i></p> 
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INTRODUCTION

Access To Quality education is a critical issue for immigrant and underprivileged children in Southeast Asia, with Malaysia being no exception. In particular, children from Indonesian migrant families face significant barriers to formal education. These children often reside in Malaysia under temporary or irregular immigration status, making them ineligible for public schooling. This lack of access to formal education is further exacerbated by financial constraints, legal limitations, and language barriers, which create a situation of marginalization in the broader educational system. The lack of a stable and supportive learning environment can lead to a range of negative outcomes, from cognitive delays to emotional distress and social isolation.

In light of these challenges, community-based education centers have become crucial in providing some form of learning for these children. These centers, while essential, often operate under limited resources. They struggle with inadequate funding, lack of trained teachers, and insufficient teaching materials, all of which can undermine the quality of education provided. Despite these limitations, these informal settings offer a space for learning and emotional support, though the effectiveness of such interventions remains understudied.

Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), a community school serving Indonesian migrant families in Malaysia, faced a unique challenge when its regular campus underwent renovations. In response, the school temporarily relocated to a makeshift building, creating a learning environment that was even more resource-constrained than usual. During this period, a group of Indonesian volunteers stepped in to assist with the education of the children. The volunteers, despite lacking formal teaching qualifications, facilitated two short educational modules: *Critter Quest!* (a storytelling module) and *Critter Fold and Tell!* (an origami-based activity). These activities were designed to engage young children and promote learning in a fun, interactive way, bridging the gap left by the lack of formal instruction.

The volunteers were driven by a shared desire to help their peers, yet their experience in educational settings was minimal. The study aims to explore how these volunteer-led interventions impacted the learning and emotional experiences of the children. Specifically, it investigates the role of the volunteers in facilitating these activities and the outcomes these interventions had on the children's cognitive development, emotional well-being, and social interactions. The research focuses on understanding the dynamics of volunteer engagement in resource-limited, temporary educational environments and how informal educational interventions can still create meaningful learning experiences.

Education is broadly acknowledged as a vital mechanism for social integration and individual development, as well as a fundamental human right that plays a crucial role in disrupting cycles of poverty and marginalization. In Malaysia, however, access to education for immigrant children remains a persistent and multifaceted issue shaped by legal, economic, and social barriers. The increasing presence of migrant families across Southeast Asia—particularly in Malaysia—has heightened the need for systematic research on the effectiveness of non-formal education and volunteer-driven initiatives targeting marginalized groups. Non-

formal education and *Temporary Learning Environments* (TLEs) have become essential, and often the only, avenues for children excluded from formal schooling due to documentation requirements, financial hardship, language barriers, and discriminatory policies (Loganathan et al., 2022, 2023). Despite their critical role, these alternative education models operate under conditions of limited resources, unstable funding, and regulatory pressure, raising concerns about long-term sustainability. This literature review analyzes studies published after 2019 that examine the educational experiences of immigrant children in Malaysia, the central role of volunteers, and the opportunities and challenges associated with TLEs in delivering quality education to vulnerable populations.

Education for Immigrant Children in Malaysia

Immigrant children in Malaysia—particularly those from Indonesian, Rohingya (Myanmar), and other migrant backgrounds—face multiple, overlapping obstacles to accessing formal education, resulting in widespread educational exclusion and intergenerational disadvantage. Legal status constitutes the most significant barrier, as children lacking official documentation are systematically denied access to public schools, despite the implementation of the *Zero Reject Policy* in 2019, which in practice restricts enrollment to children with at least one Malaysian parent (Loganathan et al., 2022). In 2021, of the estimated 472,200 non-citizen children aged 0–19, only a small proportion of refugee and asylum-seeking children of school age were enrolled in learning centers, and access to secondary education remained extremely limited (Loganathan et al., 2023). Financial hardship and language barriers further restrict educational access, often forcing children into child labor. As a result, non-formal education centers, community-based learning initiatives, and informal guidance studios have become essential alternatives for delivering basic literacy and numeracy education (Loganathan et al., 2021; Siah et al., 2020).

Beyond academic instruction, non-formal education plays a critical role in social integration, identity development, and psychosocial support for children affected by displacement and marginalization. Programs incorporating mother-tongue instruction, cultural activities, and community engagement have been shown to strengthen children's sense of belonging while supporting cognitive and emotional growth (Loganathan et al., 2023). Interventions such as storytelling, creative arts, guided writing, and social-emotional learning (SEL) contribute to literacy development, emotional regulation, and self-confidence among

immigrant children experiencing migration-related stress and legal insecurity (Loganathan et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2024). Nevertheless, non-formal education faces persistent challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, shortages of trained educators, high teacher turnover, inconsistent funding, and lack of official recognition, all of which undermine educational continuity and quality (Loganathan et al., 2023; Siah et al., 2020).

Research indicates that culturally responsive curricula that include traditional arts, religious instruction, and community-based activities not only improve academic outcomes but also strengthen protective factors against discrimination and social (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019; Thuraisingam et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated educational inequalities, as refugee children faced additional barriers including lack of digital devices, internet connectivity, and adequate learning spaces at home, resulting in significant learning loss and increased dropout rates (Lee & Hoque, 2024).

Volunteerism in Educational Contexts

Volunteerism represents a foundational component of non-formal education in Malaysia, particularly for undocumented and immigrant children excluded from public schooling. Volunteers assume diverse roles that extend beyond teaching, including providing literacy and numeracy instruction, emotional and psychosocial support, mentoring, facilitating creative activities, and assisting with administrative operations (Loganathan et al., 2023; Siah et al., 2020). Their contributions are especially critical in contexts where professional teachers are scarce, unaffordable, or legally restricted from employment. Many community learning centers rely heavily on refugee volunteers who, despite lacking formal teaching credentials, are motivated by a strong commitment to educating children within their communities (Siah et al., 2020).

The effectiveness of volunteer-led education depends on factors such as training quality, sustained engagement, and cultural and linguistic alignment with learners. Research consistently shows that volunteers who share children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds are more successful in building trust, fostering communication, and creating culturally responsive learning environments (Loganathan et al., 2023). In addition, volunteers' emotional support helps mitigate stress, anxiety, and trauma associated with legal insecurity and social exclusion (Loganathan et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2024). However, heavy reliance on volunteers also presents challenges, including frequent absences, high turnover rates—estimated at approximately 30%—and inconsistent pedagogical quality due to limited

compensation and training (Loganathan et al., 2023; Siah et al., 2020). These issues underscore the need for sustainable funding, structured training programs, and greater institutional support.

Moreover, the absence of work permits for refugees in Malaysia means that many volunteer teachers themselves face economic hardship, limiting their capacity to commit fully to teaching roles despite their dedication to community education (Thuraisingam et al., 2022). Recent initiatives have explored partnerships between NGOs, international organizations, and private sector entities to provide more systematic volunteer training programs and modest stipends, though such efforts remain limited in scale and geographic coverage (Lee & Hoque, 2024).

The Role of Volunteers in Temporary Learning Environments (TLEs)

TLEs are established in response to crises, forced migration, and systemic exclusion from formal education and often represent the sole educational option for displaced or undocumented children. In Malaysia, community learning centers, informal guidance studios, and improvised classrooms—often located in religious or community spaces—function as TLEs, providing flexible learning environments despite limited recognition and resources (Loganathan et al., 2023; Siah et al., 2020). These settings serve not merely as temporary solutions but as essential safeguards that sustain educational access, prevent child labor, and preserve hope during prolonged displacement (UNHCR, 2024).

Volunteers play an indispensable role in TLEs by maintaining educational continuity, delivering individualized support, and implementing innovative, learner-centered pedagogies. Although TLEs typically lack standardized infrastructure, accredited curricula, and reliable technology, such constraints often encourage creative approaches such as storytelling, arts and crafts, drama, music, and project-based learning, which effectively promote cognitive development, socio-emotional skills, and cultural identity (Burde Ozen Guven Jo Kelcey Heddy Lahmann Khaled Al-Abbadi et al., 2015; Dryden-Peterson, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). The consistent presence of volunteers provides children with stability, safety, and predictability amid otherwise uncertain and stressful living conditions.

Furthermore, TLEs often serve as protective spaces where children can maintain social connections, develop peer relationships, and access psychosocial support that extends beyond formal curriculum delivery (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). The flexibility inherent in TLE structures also allows for rapid adaptation to changing circumstances, such as sudden

displacement events or policy shifts, making them resilient educational models in contexts of ongoing uncertainty and precarity (Dryden-Peterson, 2024).

Educational Interventions for Immigrant Children in TLEs

Effective educational interventions in TLEs must address both academic learning and psychosocial wellbeing, as trauma and displacement significantly affect children's ability to learn. Immigrant and refugee children often experience emotional distress resulting from family separation, violence, loss of community, discrimination, and cultural adjustment challenges, all of which negatively impact learning outcomes if left unaddressed (Loganathan et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2024). Research indicates that integrating SEL strategies, trauma-informed pedagogy, creative arts, mindfulness, and participatory learning into TLE curricula leads to improvements in emotional regulation, resilience, engagement, and overall wellbeing (UNHCR, 2024).

Programs incorporating guided storytelling, visual arts, creative writing, music and movement, and structured play support cognitive development while fostering belonging, agency, and hope (Dryden-Peterson, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). Volunteer involvement is particularly impactful, as volunteers often serve as trusted adults, mentors, and cultural mediators. Cultural and linguistic alignment between volunteers and learners strengthens these relationships and enhances educational outcomes in ways that external volunteers may struggle to replicate (Loganathan et al., 2023; Siah et al., 2020).

Additionally, technology-enhanced learning initiatives, where available, have shown promise in expanding educational access and enabling connection to global curricula, though digital divides remain a significant barrier for most refugee learners in Malaysia (Lee & Hoque, 2024). The integration of vocational skills training within TLE curricula has also emerged as an important strategy for preparing adolescent learners for economic self-sufficiency, particularly given the limited prospects for formal employment among refugee youth (Dryden-Peterson, 2024).

Immigrant Children

Immigrant children represent one of the most educationally marginalized populations in Malaysia, facing intersecting challenges related to legal status, financial instability, language barriers, discrimination, safety concerns, and psychological trauma (Loganathan et al., 2023). It is estimated that between 100,000 and 250,000 children remain out of primary and

secondary school, with non-citizen children disproportionately affected (Loganathan et al., 2022). Educational exclusion severely limits future opportunities, restricting access to higher education, formal employment, and social mobility.

Evidence demonstrates that inclusive, culturally responsive non-formal education can significantly mitigate these challenges when combined with trauma-informed practices and holistic support. Activities such as mother-tongue storytelling, arts-based expression, guided writing, and structured routines promote academic achievement, emotional wellbeing, and social development (Loganathan et al., 2021, 2023; UNHCR, 2024). Volunteers—particularly those from migrant and refugee communities—play a critical role in sustaining supportive learning environments and fostering resilience, thereby enabling immigrant children to develop the skills and confidence necessary for long-term wellbeing and potential future integration or resettlement (Dryden-Peterson, 2024).

However, despite these promising interventions, systemic barriers rooted in Malaysia's non-signatory status to the 1951 Refugee Convention continue to fundamentally limit the scale and sustainability of educational solutions for non-citizen children (Thuraisingam et al., 2022). Advocacy efforts by civil society organizations increasingly call for policy reforms that would grant refugee children access to public education and provide legal work rights for their parents, recognizing that comprehensive solutions require both educational and economic pathways (Dryden-Peterson, 2024).

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study will employ a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of four Indonesian youth volunteers who facilitated offline storytelling and origami-based vocabulary activities for immigrant children. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables the researcher to capture volunteers' personal interpretations, challenges, and reflections. Data will be collected through online semi-structured interviews conducted after the teaching sessions, allowing participants to describe their experiences freely while enabling in-depth exploration of key issues. The participants of this study are four Indonesian youth volunteers aged 16–21. They were selected based on their willingness to participate in the teaching activities, their motivation to support children's learning, and their availability during the sessions. Although they lack formal teacher training, they share an interest in creative learning activities and a desire to contribute meaningfully to the educational experience of children.

These four volunteers serve as the sole subjects of the study. Children who took part in the activities were not included as research participants because the focus of the study is strictly on the volunteers' reflections, insights, and personal experiences. The findings therefore center on how volunteers understood their roles and responsibilities within the short-term project. This study will use a single primary data collection method: semi-structured interviews conducted online. This method will be appropriate because it will enable the researcher to explore the volunteers' perspectives in depth while still maintaining enough structure to ensure that key topics will be consistently addressed across participants. The interviews will be conducted through platforms such as Zoom or WhatsApp video call after all teaching activities have been completed. This timing will ensure that volunteers will have already experienced the full teaching process and will be able to reflect holistically on their involvement. Conducting the interviews online will also allow participants to speak from a comfortable environment, which will facilitate more open and honest sharing. The semi-structured interview guide will include questions about volunteers' experience after joining the program, their impressions during the teaching sessions, challenges they encountered when interacting with the children, strategies they attempted, feelings before and after teaching, and reflections on personal growth. Because the interviews will be flexible, the researcher will be able to ask follow-up questions when volunteers express points that need clarification or further detail. This approach will allow the conversations to flow naturally and will provide rich, descriptive data. The interview data will be analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes. The process will involve transcribing all recordings and repeatedly reviewing the transcripts to develop familiarity with the content. Inductive coding will be applied, with codes generated directly from participants' narratives. Related codes will then be organized into broader themes that capture shared experiences among the volunteers.

These themes will be refined to ensure alignment with the research objectives and accurate representation of the data. The refined themes will be interpreted to understand how youth volunteers navigate the teaching environment and perceive their challenges and personal growth. To enhance credibility, member checking will be conducted, allowing participants to review and verify the preliminary interpretations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This chapter discusses the findings of the study based on qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews with four Indonesian youth volunteers, referred to as R1, R2, R3, and R4. These volunteers were involved in facilitating English vocabulary learning activities through storytelling and origami for immigrant children at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL). Using thematic analysis, the data revealed several recurring patterns that illustrate the volunteers' motivations, teaching approaches, challenges, and perceived impacts of their involvement in a Temporary Learning Environment (TLE).

Theme 1: Motivation to Volunteer and Expectations of the Experience

All four respondents shared that their decision to volunteer was influenced by prior exposure to volunteer activities, particularly through friends who had participated in earlier programs. R1 and R3 explained that seeing their friends' stories and documentation sparked curiosity and encouraged them to try volunteering themselves. For them, this program was viewed as an entry point into the world of volunteerism, especially within an international and socially meaningful context.

In addition to external influence, intrinsic motivation played an important role. R2 and R4 expressed that they hoped the experience would provide opportunities for personal learning and growth. Spending approximately one week in a foreign country while working with unfamiliar people was perceived as both challenging and exciting. The respondents expected the experience to help them become more adaptable, independent, and socially aware. Overall, volunteering at SIKL was not seen merely as an act of teaching, but as a learning journey that allowed them to step outside their comfort zones.

Theme 2: Teaching Approaches and Strategies to Engage Children

When describing their teaching approaches, all respondents emphasized the importance of adapting lessons to the children's age and learning needs. Because the activities were designed to be game-based, the volunteers avoided formal teaching styles and instead focused on creating a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. R1 noted that being friendly and playful helped reduce the gap between volunteers and children, making the learning process feel more natural.

Storytelling was described as particularly effective in introducing English vocabulary. R2 explained that children were more willing to repeat and remember new words when they

were embedded in stories with characters and simple narratives. Origami activities further supported learning by allowing children to actively participate using their hands, which helped maintain attention and interest. R3 observed that children who were initially shy became more engaged once they were involved in hands-on activities.

In addition to instructional methods, the volunteers highlighted the role of encouragement and rewards. Simple verbal praise and small prizes were used to motivate children and sustain their enthusiasm throughout the sessions. These strategies helped create a positive learning environment where children felt comfortable participating without fear of making mistakes.

Theme 3: Challenges in Teaching within a Temporary Learning Environment

Although the activities were generally successful, all respondents acknowledged that teaching in a temporary and resource-limited environment presented several challenges. One major difficulty was managing the children's mood and attention. R1 and R3 mentioned that children's emotions could change quickly, especially when they felt tired or distracted, requiring the volunteers to continuously adjust their teaching strategies.

Another significant challenge was physical fatigue. R2 and R4 explained that limited rest and intensive daily schedules affected their energy levels during teaching sessions. As young volunteers without formal teaching backgrounds, maintaining a cheerful and energetic presence was sometimes difficult. However, they felt responsible for ensuring that their own tiredness did not negatively affect the children's learning experience.

The physical condition of the learning space also posed challenges. The temporary classroom lacked adequate facilities and space, which occasionally disrupted the flow of activities. Despite these limitations, the volunteers tried to remain flexible and creative in managing the situation. These findings highlight the emotional and physical demands faced by youth volunteers working in TLEs.

Theme 4: Perceived Impact on Children and Volunteers' Personal Development

All respondents believed that the children benefited from the activities, particularly in terms of engagement and confidence. R1 and R2 observed that children became more comfortable using English vocabulary when learning was combined with play. The informal and supportive atmosphere reduced pressure and encouraged active participation.

Beyond language learning, R3 emphasized the cultural value of the activities. The inclusion of Indonesian folk stories and familiar themes helped children who were living far from their home country remain connected to their cultural background. This aspect was considered especially meaningful for immigrant children who may experience a sense of disconnection from their identity.

The volunteers also reflected on how the experience affected them personally. All respondents reported gaining greater empathy, patience, and communication skills. R4 shared that interacting closely with the children changed their perspective on education, highlighting the importance of emotional support alongside academic learning. The relationships formed with fellow volunteers and the children were described as memorable and meaningful, reinforcing the value of the experience beyond technical teaching outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study support existing research on volunteer-led education in non-formal and temporary learning environments. The motivations expressed by the respondents align with previous studies that highlight strong intrinsic and social motivations among youth volunteers involved in marginalized educational contexts. Their desire for personal growth and meaningful contribution reflects the role of volunteerism as both a social and developmental experience.

The effectiveness of game-based learning observed in this study is consistent with literature emphasizing storytelling, creative activities, and play-based methods in TLEs. These approaches not only support vocabulary acquisition but also foster emotional engagement and a sense of belonging among children. The findings suggest that even short-term interventions led by non-professional educators can be effective when activities are age-appropriate, culturally relevant, and emotionally supportive.

Challenges related to fatigue, classroom management, and limited resources echo concerns raised in previous studies regarding volunteer sustainability. The emotional labor required to maintain a positive learning environment, despite physical exhaustion and environmental constraints, highlights the need for better preparation and support for youth volunteers.

Finally, the reciprocal nature of the experience reinforces the idea that volunteer-led education benefits both learners and volunteers. While children gain access to engaging

learning opportunities, volunteers develop empathy, social awareness, and a deeper understanding of educational inequality. This mutual impact underscores the value of volunteer involvement in addressing educational gaps within immigrant communities.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of Indonesian youth volunteers who took part in teaching English vocabulary to immigrant children in a Temporary Learning Environment (TLE) at Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL). Through thematic analysis of interviews with four volunteers, the findings show that volunteer-led, game-based learning activities can provide meaningful educational and emotional experiences for children, even within limited and temporary learning settings.

The volunteers' motivations were shaped by both personal and social factors. Many were inspired by peers who had previously joined similar programs, while others were driven by a desire for self-development and social contribution. For the volunteers, the program was not viewed solely as a teaching responsibility, but also as an opportunity to learn, adapt, and gain new perspectives through direct engagement in an unfamiliar environment.

The findings also highlight the effectiveness of creative and play-based teaching approaches. Activities such as storytelling and origami helped maintain children's interest and encouraged active participation in learning English vocabulary. By creating a relaxed and supportive atmosphere, the volunteers were able to reduce learning anxiety and foster a sense of enjoyment and inclusion among the children. These approaches demonstrate that informal learning strategies can be highly effective in temporary and non-formal educational contexts.

Despite these positive outcomes, the volunteers faced several challenges, particularly related to classroom management, physical fatigue, and the limitations of the temporary learning space. Managing children's emotions and maintaining energy during teaching sessions required significant effort. However, the volunteers showed adaptability by adjusting activities, supporting one another, and maintaining a positive attitude in front of the children. This reflects the emotional and physical demands experienced by youth volunteers working in resource-constrained environments.

Overall, the study reveals that the impact of the program extended beyond the children's learning outcomes. While the children benefited from increased engagement,

confidence, and enjoyment, the volunteers themselves experienced personal growth, including greater empathy, improved communication skills, and heightened awareness of educational inequality. These findings suggest that youth volunteerism in temporary learning environments not only supports immigrant children's education but also contributes meaningfully to the personal development of the volunteers involved.

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