

Exploring Students' Perceptions of the ToRIC (Toraja Indigenous Culture) Model in English for Tourism Learning

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Abstract

The integration of indigenous culture into English for Tourism (EFT) learning has gained increasing attention as an approach to promoting meaningful language learning while preserving local cultural heritage. However, limited research has explored students' perceptions of culturally responsive instructional models specifically designed for tourism-oriented English learning. This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of the ToRIC (Toraja Indigenous Culture) Model in English for Tourism learning. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the study involved 25 undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja who had experienced learning through the ToRIC Model. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaires and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed four major themes. First, students perceived that the ToRIC Model enhanced their English communication skills through authentic tourism-related learning activities such as role plays, tour guide simulations, and cultural presentations. Second, the model increased students' awareness and appreciation of Toraja indigenous culture by connecting language learning with local cultural heritage. Third, students reported higher classroom engagement and learning motivation because the instructional materials reflected their cultural experiences and future professional needs. Finally, although students expressed overwhelmingly positive perceptions, they also identified challenges in translating indigenous cultural concepts into English and in using appropriate tourism-related vocabulary. The study concludes that the ToRIC Model provides a culturally responsive learning approach that simultaneously promotes English communication competence, cultural identity, and authentic tourism learning. The findings contribute to the development of culturally responsive English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy by demonstrating the value of integrating indigenous cultural heritage into English for Tourism education.

Keywords: *English for Tourism, ToRIC Model, culturally responsive teaching, students' perceptions, Toraja indigenous culture*

Introduction

English for Tourism (EFT) has become an increasingly important branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly in regions with strong tourism potential and rich cultural heritage. The primary objective of EFT is not only to improve students' English communication skills but also to prepare them to communicate local cultural values effectively to international visitors. In Indonesia, however, English for Tourism instruction often adopts commercially available teaching materials that emphasize global tourism contexts while providing limited opportunities for students to explore and

promote their own indigenous cultures. Consequently, students may acquire linguistic competence but lack the confidence and cultural knowledge necessary to represent their local identity in authentic tourism communication. This issue is particularly relevant in Toraja, South Sulawesi, whose distinctive cultural heritage including Tongkonan traditional houses, Rambu Solo' and Rambu Tuka' ceremonies, indigenous values, and oral traditions constitutes an internationally recognized tourism asset but remains insufficiently integrated into English language instruction.

Recent educational research has emphasized the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in creating meaningful and contextualized language learning experiences. Rather than treating culture as supplementary content, culturally responsive teaching positions students' cultural backgrounds as valuable learning resources that enhance engagement, motivation, and academic achievement (Fatus et al., 2026; Lo, 2025). Similarly, translanguaging has gained increasing attention as an instructional approach that encourages learners to utilize their multilingual repertoires to facilitate language learning while strengthening cultural identity (Beiler & Villacañas de Castro, 2025; Zakharova & Lasagabaster, 2026). These perspectives suggest that integrating local culture into English instruction can simultaneously promote communicative competence and intercultural awareness.

Within English for Tourism education, several recent studies have reported positive outcomes from integrating local cultural resources into language learning. Rahman et al. (2022) demonstrated that contextualized English for Tourism materials improved students' communicative competence and learning motivation. Likewise, Wirza et al. (2025) found that translanguaging practices in tourism-related contexts enhanced learners' understanding of cultural identity while improving their ability to communicate local cultural values in English. Digital and culturally responsive pedagogies have also been shown to support authentic learning experiences by connecting classroom instruction with real-life tourism contexts (Lo, 2025). These findings indicate that tourism-oriented English learning becomes more meaningful when students actively engage with their own cultural heritage.

In the context of Toraja, Tauala'bi' et al. (2025) introduced a trilingual instructional approach integrating Toraja, Indonesian, and English to strengthen students' cultural knowledge and English communication competence in tourism education. Their findings revealed that students demonstrated increased confidence in describing local culture and greater appreciation of indigenous heritage through multilingual learning activities. Nevertheless, the study primarily focused on instructional implementation and learning outcomes rather than exploring students' perceptions of a comprehensive culture-based learning model specifically designed for English for Tourism instruction.

Although previous studies have consistently reported the benefits of culturally responsive pedagogy, translanguaging, and local culture integration, limited research has investigated how students perceive the implementation of an indigenous culture-based instructional model in English for Tourism learning. Most existing studies have evaluated instructional effectiveness, language achievement, or curriculum development, while learners' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward the implementation of such models remain underexplored. Understanding students' perceptions is particularly important because positive learning experiences influence motivation, classroom engagement, and the sustainability of innovative instructional practices. Furthermore, no previous study has specifically examined students' perceptions of the ToRIC (Toraja Indigenous Culture) Model, a culturally responsive learning model developed to integrate Toraja indigenous culture into English for Tourism instruction.

Based on these gaps, this study addresses the following research question: How do students perceive the implementation of the ToRIC (Toraja Indigenous Culture) Model in English for Tourism learning? Accordingly, the objective of this study is to explore students' perceptions of the ToRIC Model with respect to its contribution to English language learning, cultural understanding, classroom engagement, and learning motivation. The novelty of this study lies in its investigation of learners' perceptions of a locally developed, culturally responsive instructional model specifically designed to integrate Toraja indigenous culture into English for Tourism learning. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on culturally responsive English language education and provide practical insights for integrating indigenous cultural heritage into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' perceptions of the ToRIC (Toraja Indigenous Culture) Model in English for Tourism learning. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of a particular educational phenomenon within its natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Merriam & Tisdell, 2025). The study was conducted in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja during the implementation of the English for Tourism course, where the ToRIC Model had been integrated into classroom instruction.

The participants were 25 undergraduate students enrolled in the English for Tourism course. They were selected using purposive sampling because they had directly experienced learning through the ToRIC Model for one academic semester. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research because it allows researchers to select participants who possess rich information relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Before data collection, participants were informed about the objectives of the study and provided informed consent. Their anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaires to obtain comprehensive information from multiple sources. Observation was conducted throughout the learning process to document students' classroom engagement, participation, interactions, and responses during ToRIC-based learning activities. Semi-structured interviews were subsequently carried out with selected participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences, opinions, and perceptions regarding the implementation of the ToRIC Model. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. In addition, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to all participants to capture broader perspectives concerning learning motivation, cultural awareness, language development, and overall learning experiences. The use of multiple data collection methods enabled methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility of the research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

The research instruments included an observation checklist, an interview protocol, and an open-ended questionnaire. These instruments were developed based on the research objectives and the theoretical principles of culturally responsive teaching and students' perceptions in language learning. To ensure content validity, the instruments were evaluated by two experts in English language education, and several revisions were made based on their suggestions before being administered to the participants. Expert

judgment is widely recommended to improve the validity and clarity of qualitative research instruments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2025).

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative data analysis proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020). The analysis involved four interconnected stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, while observation notes and questionnaire responses were organized systematically before being coded into meaningful categories. Similar codes were grouped into broader themes representing students' perceptions of the ToRIC Model. The emerging themes were continuously compared across different data sources to ensure consistency and trustworthiness. To enhance the credibility of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed by comparing data obtained from observations, interviews, and questionnaires. Furthermore, member checking was conducted by asking several participants to review the interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations to confirm that the findings accurately represented their experiences (Miles et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Results

The data obtained from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2020). The analysis generated four major themes representing students' perceptions of the ToRIC (Toraja Indigenous Culture) Model in English for Tourism learning: (1) enhancement of English communication skills, (2) increased cultural awareness and appreciation, (3) improved learning engagement and motivation, and (4) challenges encountered during the implementation of the model.

Enhancement of English Communication Skills

Classroom observations revealed that students actively participated in role plays, tour guide simulations, group discussions, and presentations related to Toraja tourism destinations and indigenous culture. Throughout the learning process, students demonstrated increasing confidence in expressing ideas in English when discussing familiar cultural topics. They were able to explain local traditions, tourist attractions, and cultural practices using English more fluently than at the beginning of the course.

The interview findings supported these observations. Students explained that learning English through familiar cultural contexts made communication easier because they already possessed background knowledge about the topics.

One participant stated:

"Learning English through Toraja culture made speaking easier because I already understood the content. I only needed to learn how to express it in English." (Participant 7).

Classroom observations indicated that students became increasingly confident in using English during tourism-related learning activities. Throughout the implementation of the ToRIC Model, students actively participated in role plays, tour guide simulations, group discussions, and cultural presentations. They demonstrated greater fluency in describing Toraja tourist destinations, traditional ceremonies, and local customs in English.

The documentation further supported these observations. Students' presentation materials, tourism scripts, and learning worksheets showed that they were able to use English expressions to introduce local tourist attractions and explain Toraja indigenous

culture. The documents also reflected the use of tourism-related vocabulary and culturally appropriate descriptions during learning activities

Increased Cultural Awareness and Appreciation

The second theme indicated that the ToRIC Model strengthened students' awareness and appreciation of Toraja indigenous culture. Classroom observations showed that students enthusiastically discussed Tongkonan architecture, Rambu Solo', Rambu Tuka', traditional values, and local wisdom during classroom activities. Many students voluntarily shared personal experiences related to Toraja cultural traditions, creating meaningful interactions between language learning and cultural knowledge.

Interview participants also expressed that integrating indigenous culture into English learning encouraged them to value and preserve their cultural heritage.

One participant commented:

"Before joining this course, I had never thought that our culture could become English learning material. Now I feel more confident introducing Toraja culture to visitors." (Participant 12).

Observation data showed that students actively discussed various aspects of Toraja indigenous culture, including Tongkonan architecture, Rambu Solo', Rambu Tuka', local wisdom, and traditional values. Students frequently connected classroom discussions with their own cultural experiences and demonstrated enthusiasm when presenting local cultural topics.

The documentation confirmed these findings. Students' written assignments and presentation slides contained descriptions of Toraja cultural heritage, tourism destinations, and indigenous traditions. These documents illustrated that students integrated cultural knowledge with English language learning by describing local cultural assets using English.

Improved Learning Engagement and Motivation

Interview data further revealed that students perceived the learning process as enjoyable because the instructional materials reflected their identities and everyday lives.

As one participant explained:

"I enjoyed every activity because we learned through our own culture. It motivated me to participate and practice speaking English." (Participant 18).

Observation data indicated that students were consistently engaged during classroom activities. They actively participated in discussions, collaborative tasks, tourism simulations, and cultural presentations. Students appeared more enthusiastic when learning activities were connected to their own cultural experiences.

Classroom documentation supported these findings by showing students actively involved in various ToRIC-based learning activities. Photographs documented students participating in small-group discussions, delivering presentations on Toraja cultural heritage, performing tour guide simulations, and collaborating to explain local traditions in English. The documentation also illustrated a lively classroom atmosphere characterized by active interaction, peer collaboration, and high levels of participation. These visual records corroborated the observation and interview data, indicating that the integration of Toraja indigenous culture fostered meaningful engagement and enhanced students' motivation throughout the learning process.

challenges encountered during the implementation of the model.

Despite the positive perceptions, the findings also identified several challenges. Classroom observations showed that some students occasionally struggled to explain Toraja cultural concepts in English, particularly when appropriate vocabulary was unavailable.

The interviews confirmed this difficulty.

One participant stated:

"Some Toraja cultural terms cannot be translated directly into English. I often had to explain the meaning instead of translating the words." (Participant 4)

Students also mentioned that they needed additional practice in tourism-related vocabulary and speaking strategies to communicate indigenous cultural concepts more accurately.

The findings indicate that students perceived the ToRIC Model as a meaningful and engaging approach to English for Tourism learning. The model supported the development of English communication skills, strengthened cultural awareness, increased classroom engagement and motivation, and provided authentic learning experiences while revealing several linguistic challenges related to communicating indigenous cultural concepts in English.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed methodological triangulation by comparing data obtained from classroom observations and documentation. Observation data concerning students' participation, classroom interactions, engagement, and English communication during the implementation of the ToRIC Model were continuously compared with documentary evidence, including lesson plans, teaching materials, students' worksheets, presentation slides, photographs of classroom activities, and students' learning products. The consistency between these two sources of evidence enhanced the credibility of the findings and provided a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the ToRIC Model in English for Tourism learning. In addition, the data were analyzed systematically using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020), involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that students perceived the ToRIC (Toraja Indigenous Culture) Model as a meaningful instructional approach for English for Tourism learning. The model enabled students to improve their English communication skills while simultaneously strengthening their understanding of Toraja indigenous culture. These findings support the principles of culturally responsive teaching, which emphasize that students learn more effectively when instructional content reflects their cultural identities and lived experiences (Gay, 2018). The positive perceptions expressed by the participants indicate that integrating local culture into English language instruction creates a more authentic and meaningful learning environment.

The first finding revealed that students perceived improvements in their English communication skills through authentic tourism-related learning activities. Role plays, tour guide simulations, and cultural presentations provided meaningful opportunities for students to practice English in realistic situations. These findings are consistent with Rahman et al. (2022), who reported that contextualized English for Tourism instruction enhances learners' communicative competence because language is practiced within authentic professional contexts. Likewise, Lo (2025) argued that culturally contextualized English language pedagogy supports authentic communication by connecting classroom

learning with learners' sociocultural realities. Therefore, the ToRIC Model not only develops students' language proficiency but also prepares them to communicate local cultural knowledge to international visitors.

The second finding showed that integrating Toraja indigenous culture into English learning increased students' cultural awareness and appreciation. Participants recognized that learning English through local traditions, cultural values, and tourism attractions encouraged them to preserve and promote their cultural heritage. This finding aligns with the concept of culturally responsive teaching, which positions learners' cultural backgrounds as valuable educational resources rather than merely supplementary content (Gay, 2018). Similar findings were reported by Wirza et al. (2025), who found that integrating local culture through translanguaging practices strengthened students' cultural identity while improving their ability to communicate cultural meanings in English. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that indigenous culture can become the central content of English for Tourism learning instead of functioning only as supporting material.

Another important finding concerns students' increased classroom engagement and learning motivation. Participants described the learning activities as enjoyable because they were directly connected to their own experiences and cultural backgrounds. Observation data also showed active participation during collaborative discussions and tourism simulations. These findings support Self-Determination Theory, which suggests that meaningful and relevant learning experiences enhance intrinsic motivation by fulfilling learners' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Furthermore, Fatus et al. (2026) argued that culturally responsive instruction encourages greater student participation because learners perceive the instructional materials as personally relevant. The findings therefore suggest that the ToRIC Model contributes not only to cognitive development but also to students' affective engagement in learning English.

Although students expressed overwhelmingly positive perceptions, the study also identified several challenges related to translating indigenous cultural concepts into English. Many participants reported difficulties explaining Toraja cultural practices because some indigenous terms have no direct English equivalents. This finding is consistent with recent studies on pedagogical translanguaging, which recognize that multilingual learners often negotiate meaning across languages when communicating culturally specific concepts (Beiler & Villacañas de Castro, 2025; Zakharova & Lasagabaster, 2026). Rather than viewing this linguistic challenge as a limitation, translanguaging perspectives consider it an opportunity for deeper intercultural communication and meaning-making. The findings therefore suggest that English for Tourism instruction should provide explicit support for developing vocabulary and communication strategies that enable students to explain culturally unique concepts accurately to international audiences.

The findings of this study also reinforce the previous work of Taula'bi' et al. (2025), who demonstrated that trilingual instruction integrating Toraja, Indonesian, and English improved students' communication competence and cultural understanding. However, whereas the previous study primarily evaluated instructional implementation and learning outcomes, the present study specifically explored students' perceptions of the ToRIC Model. By examining learners' voices, this study provides a deeper understanding of how students experience culturally responsive English for Tourism instruction and why they perceive the model as meaningful for language learning and cultural preservation.

The novelty of this study lies in its investigation of students' perceptions of a locally developed instructional model that integrates Toraja indigenous culture into English for Tourism learning. Unlike previous studies that mainly examined culturally responsive teaching or translanguaging in general English language education, this research specifically focuses on English for Tourism within an indigenous cultural context. The findings contribute to the growing literature on culturally responsive English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by demonstrating that local cultural heritage can function as authentic learning content while simultaneously promoting English communication skills, cultural identity, and learner engagement. Consequently, the ToRIC Model offers practical implications for English language educators seeking to integrate indigenous knowledge into tourism-oriented language education and other ESP contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored students' perceptions of the ToRIC (Toraja Indigenous Culture) Model in English for Tourism learning. The findings revealed that students generally perceived the model positively. They believed that integrating Toraja indigenous culture into English learning enhanced their English communication skills, strengthened their understanding and appreciation of local cultural heritage, increased classroom engagement and learning motivation, and provided authentic learning experiences relevant to tourism contexts. At the same time, the study identified several challenges, particularly in translating indigenous cultural concepts into English and using appropriate tourism-related vocabulary. These findings indicate that the ToRIC Model has the potential to serve as a culturally responsive instructional approach that integrates language learning with local cultural preservation in English for Tourism education.

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on culturally responsive English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by demonstrating that indigenous culture can function as authentic learning content rather than merely as supplementary material. More specifically, it provides empirical evidence of students' perceptions of the ToRIC Model, thereby extending previous studies that have primarily focused on instructional implementation and learning outcomes. However, the findings should be interpreted within the context of this study. The research involved a relatively small number of participants from a single English Education Study Program, and the results represent students' perceptions within one institutional setting. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all English for Tourism contexts without further investigation.

Based on the findings, English language educators are encouraged to incorporate local cultural resources into English for Tourism instruction to create more meaningful, authentic, and culturally relevant learning experiences. Curriculum developers may also consider integrating indigenous cultural content into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses to promote both language competence and cultural sustainability. Furthermore, adequate instructional support, particularly in developing tourism-related vocabulary and strategies for explaining culture-specific concepts in English, should be provided to help students communicate indigenous knowledge more effectively.

Future research is recommended to examine the implementation of the ToRIC Model in different educational settings, involving larger and more diverse participant groups to enhance the transferability of the findings. Researchers may also employ mixed-methods or experimental designs to investigate the effectiveness of the model in improving English proficiency, intercultural communicative competence, and tourism communication skills. In addition, further studies could explore lecturers' perceptions,

curriculum implementation, or the integration of digital learning technologies with the ToRIC Model to support culturally responsive English for Tourism education.

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