

How Do Baristas Really Learn English? An Inside Look at Workplace Language Acquisition

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Abstract

The use of English in the workplace is increasingly crucial, especially in service sectors such as coffee shops, which serve customers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Baristas, as the spearhead of service, are not only required to be proficient in preparing coffee but also to communicate effectively, including in English. This study aims to uncover the methods baristas use at Naya Coffee Shop to learn English and the difficulties they encounter during this process. A descriptive qualitative approach was used in this study, with data collection techniques including observation, interviews, and documentation. The results indicate that baristas tend to rely on hands-on learning methods, such as CLT and Immersion, as they align with communication needs in the workplace. Formal methods such as Grammar- Translation and Blended Learning were not used due to their lack of relevance in their work context. The main obstacles baristas face in learning English include limited vocabulary, low self-confidence, and the pressure of serving foreign customers. These findings emphasize the importance of a work-based, hands-on, and practical learning approach to support English development in a professional work setting.

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INTRODUCTION

In the service industry such as coffee shops, English language skills are very important, especially for frontline workers such as baristas who interact directly with customers. The role of baristas extends beyond coffee preparation to encompass comprehensive customer interaction and service delivery (Kim & Kim, 2016). This dual responsibility creates unique language learning challenges, as baristas must acquire specialized English vocabulary and communication skills within fast-paced, high-pressure work environments (Serviano et al., 2024). Unlike formal educational settings, workplace language acquisition occurs through informal, experiential learning processes that deserve systematic investigation (Basturkmen, 2024). The ability to understand and use English not only helps baristas interact with foreign customers, but is also needed to understand various special terms in the world of coffee, most of which come from English. (Hoffmann, 2014).

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In various big cities, coffee shops have become centers of dynamic social interaction. However, in smaller areas such as Rantau, the phenomenon of the development of modern coffee shops is also starting to increase. Naya Coffee Shop, as one of the fairly well-known coffee shops in Rantau, is an example of a place where baristas are faced with the challenge of meeting increasingly high service standards, including mastery of English.

Mastering language of service is crucial for food and beverage professionals to enhance customer experiences, advance their careers, and position themselves as valuable assets to their employers (Asriyani et al., 2023). In reality, not all baristas at Naya Coffee Shop have a formal educational background in English. Many of them may have limited mastery of this foreign language, so the process of learning English is more often done informally, through daily interactions at work or through direct experience serving customers. In addition, the presence of English in the menu and daily interactions at Naya Coffee Shop also presents additional challenges for baristas.

Current research in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emphasizes the importance of context-specific language learning approaches tailored to professional requirements (Widodo, 2016). However, limited research exists on how service industry workers, particularly baristas, naturally acquire English skills in authentic workplace settings. This research focused on the importance of English in daily work of baristas at Naya Coffee Shop Rantau exposing the common methods of learning English by baristas and the challenges faced by baristas in learning English.

METHOD

In this study, which adopts a phenomenological approach, the researcher used narrative inquiry to delve deeply into the essence of the experience as lived and described by the participants. The study focused on Naya Coffee Shop, where baristas use English as communication medium. The data are collected through observation, interview, document analysis ensured comprehensive data collection and enhanced research validity (Creswell, 2009). Based on pre-observation of daily-work activities of Baristas; duration of work, observable English proficiency, prior learning background, and willingness of participation, out of four baristas employed at the establishment, the researcher selected two individuals as participants through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis covers a range of procedures, identified recurring patterns in learning strategies and challenges, providing systematic insights into workplace language acquisition processes (Howitt, 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

How Baristas at Naya Coffee Shop Learn English

The findings indicate that baristas at Naya Coffee Shop rely on interactive and workplace-embedded methods to learn English. Specifically, four learning methods were commonly identified: The Audiolingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and Immersion. These approaches were employed naturally through workplace interaction, peer collaboration, and direct customer service experiences.

Audiolingual Method

During observation, a junior barista was seen repeatedly mouthing the phrase “*Mau yang hot atau yang iced?*” after hearing it several times from a more fluent coworker during customer service. This subtle, almost unconscious act of repetition without any formal instruction points to the internalization of language through auditory exposure and behavioral conditioning, as emphasized in the Audiolingual tradition.

One of the baristas shared that she tends to remember and practice English phrases that are frequently used on the job. She said, “*Kalau sudah sering dengar dan ucap, lama-lama nempel di kepala.*” (July, 6, 2024)

This statement reflects the essence of stimulus-response learning: when specific phrases are repeated often enough in consistent situations, they become habitual and easier to recall under similar circumstances.

Another barista, A, mentioned that he practices speaking English by copying exactly what his seniors say, and then trying it out with customers once he feels more confident. He admitted,

“*Saya dengar dulu mereka ngomong apa, terus saya tiru. Kalau sudah biasa, baru saya coba sendiri ke pelanggan.*” (July, 6, 2024)

This peer-driven repetition not only reinforces memory but also helps build the fluency necessary for spontaneous communication a central goal of the Audiolingual Method.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

During interviews and informal conversations, several baristas revealed that they feel more confident using English when they are not focused on being “grammatically correct,” but rather on making themselves understood. One barista, identified as E in this study, explained:

“*Saya enggak mikir grammar pas ngomong sama bule, yang penting dia paham saya ngomong apa.*” (July, 7, 2024)

This statement encapsulates the heart of CLT: the primary goal of language use is communication, not grammatical perfection. The emphasis lies on meaning-making and the negotiation of understanding, even if errors occur along the way.

In interviews, another participant, A, mentioned that the best way she learns English is by “talking to customers and just going for it.” She added:

“*Saya latihan ngomong langsung aja. Kadang salah, tapi kalau pelanggan ngerti, saya senang dan makin pede.*” (July, 7, 2024)

Her description aligns with the communicative approach’s encouragement of fluency over accuracy, where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process rather than obstacles.

CLIL: Learning through Content

The integration of content and language was particularly observable in moments where baristas had to explain the coffee-making process or the characteristics of a menu item to customers, especially foreigners. For instance, during one afternoon shift, a

customer asked about the difference between a flat white and a latte. The barista, A, responded confidently in English, explaining:

“Flat white is stronger, less milk than latte, more espresso.” (July, 6, 2024)

Though grammatically simple, this explanation demonstrates how the barista communicated technical content through English in a meaningful and accurate way. Here, learning occurs through the act of using English to transmit job-specific knowledge; this is precisely the essence of CLIL.

A described how she became more familiar with English vocabulary not by memorizing word lists, but by constantly being surrounded by coffee-related discussions and instructions in English. She stated:

“Nama-nama biji kopi, jenis-jenis rasa, semua itu lama-lama tahu karena sering lihat di menu dan ditanya pelanggan.” (July, 6, 2024)

This points to an incidental form of language acquisition where the barista learns English because she needs to understand and explain content. Over time, the language becomes embedded in her memory as part of her job performance.

Immersion: Learning by Being Surrounded

During the course of observation, it became evident that the coffee shop’s environment naturally fosters immersion. English is frequently used on signage, menus, order systems, and even in casual banter among the staff when international customers are present. The staff is also encouraged both informally and sometimes explicitly by the manager to use English whenever possible to maintain the shop’s welcoming ambiance for non-Indonesian guests.

For instance, E shared in an interview:

“Kalau ada bule datang, otomatis kami switch ke English. Lama-lama jadi kebiasaan.” (July, 7, 2024)

This spontaneous “switching” is a clear mark of immersive practice, where English becomes the default mode of communication in specific contexts.

Immersion also operates on a cognitive level. Baristas begin to think in English, especially during high-paced work periods. Several interviewees mentioned that certain phrases or commands now naturally come to them in English like “Next order!”, “Double shot!”, or “Table for two.” These internalized expressions reflect how deeply embedded the language becomes when learned through practical, repeated exposure.

The atmosphere at Naya Coffee Shop also supports affective dimensions of immersion. Because the environment is relaxed and non-judgmental, baristas are more willing to take risks in using English. Mistakes are tolerated, even smiled at. As one barista, E, put it:

“Kadang salah ngomong, tapi pelanggan malah bantu. Jadi saya nggak takut salah.” (July, 8, 2024)

In conclusion, immersion at Naya Coffee Shop is not imposed; it is organic, evolving from the dynamic intersection between language needs and service culture. Baristas are not

just working in a coffee shop; they are living in a small but significant English-speaking world one order, one smile, and one conversation at a time.

Difficulties Faced by Baristas at Naya Coffee Shop in Learning English

Although the baristas at Naya Coffee Shop demonstrated meaningful engagement with English through methods such as the Audiolingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and Immersion, their learning journey faced some challenges.

Affective Barriers: Anxiety and Self-Doubt

Emotional and psychological factors play a substantial role in the baristas' language learning difficulties. E shared:

"Takut salah ngomong. Apalagi kalau pelanggan bule keliatannya serius." (July, 6, 2024)

The pressure to perform correctly in real time often leads to hesitation or complete avoidance, particularly among newer staff. While immersion helps reduce anxiety over time, initial stages are often marked by insecurity and silence, hindering spontaneous communication.

Lack of Exposure Beyond the Workplace

Although the coffee shop provides some immersive English experience, the broader environment of Rantau does not offer frequent or varied exposure to the language. Outside of work, most baristas return to Indonesian-speaking communities and engage in minimal English practice.

As E respondent noted:

"Di luar kerja, nggak ada teman ngobrol pakai bahasa Inggris. Jadi cepat lupa." (July, 9, 2024)

This limited exposure results in vocabulary attrition and hinders the development of deeper linguistic competence.

Cognitive Load and Learning Style Mismatches

Several baristas expressed difficulty retaining new vocabulary and complex sentence structures. This may be attributed to cognitive overload, especially during busy hours when attention is divided between language and task completion. Moreover, some learning methods used at the shop such as repetition or situational phrases favor auditory learners. Baristas with different learning preferences may struggle to engage fully without supplementary materials or support.

A commented:

"Kadang lupa arti kata yang sudah sering dengar, karena nggak pernah ditulis atau dijelasin." (July, 6, 2024)

This reflects a gap in multi-modal reinforcement, where concepts are not encoded deeply enough to ensure retention.

Time Constraints and Social Pressures

A recurring theme in both interviews and field observations is the limited time baristas have for formal or intentional English learning. With long shifts, physical fatigue, and personal responsibilities, little energy remains for study or reflection. This is compounded by social pressures newer baristas may feel reluctant to ask questions or admit confusion, especially when working alongside more fluent peers. A said:

“Nggak enak nanya terus, takut dibilang nggak bisa kerja.”

(July, 5, 2024)

The pressure to appear competent can reduce learning opportunities, particularly in a work culture that values speed and multitasking.

Limited Access to Structured Learning Resources

While informal learning occurs daily, the lack of structured resources such as training modules, feedback systems, or curated vocabulary lists limits the baristas' language development. Some expressed interest in more formal guidance, such as short in-house workshops or digital resources, but these remain unavailable.

A said:

“Kalau ada daftar kata-kata penting atau video pendek buat latihan, pasti membantu.” (July, 9, 2024)

This suggests a need for employer-supported interventions to supplement natural language exposure with targeted learning. The difficulties faced by baristas in learning English at Naya Coffee Shop are not merely linguistic but also deeply embedded in emotional, social, and environmental contexts.

DISCUSSION

Behavioral psychology forms the psychological foundation of the audiolingual method (Tian, 2025). Audiolingual Method was evident in the repetitive use of set expressions and patterned phrases used during customer service interactions (Rosi & Suharyadi, 2024). ALM focused on the use of mechanical and pattern drills practice to acquire languages (Benati, 2020). This method's emphasis on repetition and habit formation, as Richards (2015) described, resonates with how baristas internalize English expressions used in greeting, serving, and responding to customer queries. They often mimic phrases they hear from supervisors or colleagues, reinforcing the behaviorist perspective of learning through stimulus-response patterns.

Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes the cultivation of practical communication skills and the enhancement of motivation and engagement (Zou, 2025). Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes interaction as the means and goal of learning a language (Savignon, 2001). The CLT approach consistently encourages learners to seek teaching and learning materials and tools from their current living communities, environments and societies (Dos Santos, 2019). The strong presence of CLT reflects the need for practical communication in a service-oriented setting surrounded by Baristas.

The CLIL approach strengthens a two-way understanding: language as a means of communication, and content as the core of job skills. In the vast landscape of industries and

professions, specialized vocabulary is vital for effective communication and understanding of specific sectors (Novia & Burhamzah, 2023). For example, a barista can learn about types of coffee while learning words like "brew," "grind," or "aroma." Because language and content are taught simultaneously, learning becomes efficient and integrated. Other CLIL-related issues need to pay attention is CLIL educational experience (Barrios & Mila, 2018). Baristas are not expected to produce grammatically perfect sentences; rather, their success is measured by whether they can understand and respond meaningfully to customers. This approach aligns with Dörnyei & Ryan's (2015) view that communicative competence and confidence in real-life tasks are key motivators in language acquisition.

CLIL also emerged in how English was used to learn about and explain the content of the products being sold such as the origin of coffee beans or types of brews. This supports the idea that language is best acquired when used to learn meaningful content, rather than being taught in isolation (Coyle et al., 2010).

Lastly, Immersion though informal was a critical part of the baristas' environment. Constant exposure to English menus, customer orders, and workplace signage allowed incidental learning to occur, reinforcing the concept that immersive environments can facilitate subconscious acquisition of language, similar to first language development. This echoes Marco (2025), immersion creates a positive environment for language learning. When are surrounded by the target language, learner more likely to stay motivated and engaged in the learning process. The constant exposure to the language helps you stay focused and makes it easier to retain new vocabulary and grammar structures.

One prominent issue is affective barriers, particularly anxiety and fear of making mistakes. Emotional factors can significantly impact a learner's progress. Anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt can all create significant barriers (King, 2025). As Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) said emotional factors such as self-confidence, motivation, and perceived self-efficacy are central to language learning. Emotional factors may affect language learning such as: anxiety (high/low), attitude (positive/negative), motivation (strong/weak), self-confidence, persistence and personal sense of responsibility (Sepehri et al., 2013). Motivation is argued to be a critical predictor of language learning success, but it is not clear whether motivation is equally relevant across compulsory and optional language education contexts (Parrish & Zhang, 2024). Baristas who were less confident or afraid of being judged often avoided speaking English, especially in front of foreign customers.

Another core difficulty is the lack of exposure outside the workplace. Although the coffee shop offers a semi-immersive experience, most baristas return to non-English-speaking environments at home and in social circles. This confirms Richards & Rodgers (2015) concern that language learning cannot thrive in isolated contexts. Without reinforcement and recycling of language across settings, new vocabulary and structures are quickly forgotten.

Cognitive overload also emerged as a key issue. During peak hours, baristas are expected to perform multiple tasks simultaneously preparing drinks, handling payments, and interacting with customers which leaves little mental space for conscious language processing. This aligns with Plass, et al (2010), cognitive load effect is caused by various interactions among memory capacity. In the process of learning English, individual cognitive abilities and learning styles play an important role in determining the speed and effectiveness of learning. Advanced learner dealing affective, social, and motivational factors (Lennon, 2010). Oxford

(2017) explains that learners have different ways of receiving, processing, and storing information. Mismatches between teaching strategies and students' learning styles can cause significant difficulties.

Lastly, time constraints and social pressure were significant challenges. In the workplace, time constraints are a real obstacle in the language learning process. Baristas are required to work on a tight schedule, with a fast work rhythm and are often physically tiring. According to Nation (2009), one of the challenges in language learning for working adults is the limited time available for formal or informal learning. Long work hours and physical exhaustion leave baristas with little motivation or energy to pursue formal learning.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has explored how baristas at Naya Coffee Shop learn and utilize English in their professional environment, as well as the challenges they face in the process. The findings reveal that the most utilized methods among the baristas are the Audiolingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and Immersion. Baristas experienced cognitive barriers such as limited vocabulary, difficulty with grammar, and lack of confidence. Their diverse learning styles, limited time due to busy work schedules, and occasional social pressure from customers or peers also contributed to their learning difficulties.

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