



One Student's English Language Learning Experience: The Story of a Non-English Major College Student in Indonesia

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Abstract: *English plays an indispensable role in fostering academic, personal, and professional quality. In Indonesia, introducing English to students from elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education is highly demanding. Unfortunately, probing the non-major English student's learning experiences remains under-researched. Therefore, this study is aimed at scrutinising the English language learning experience of a non-English major college student in Indonesia. John (pseudonym), a talented and outstanding student from the non-English major of a state university in Tasikmalaya, West Java, was recruited as the investigative participant. The data were garnered through semi-structured interviews and analysed using Narrative Analysis (NA) (Labov & Waletzky, 1997.). The findings reveal that supporting environment, learning motivation, and styles have become the most influential aspects for him to learn English. With this in mind, encouraging John to acquire Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) enables him to communicate in English successfully. Further, this study suggests that English is not only taught for classroom-oriented activities but also for real-life communicative purposes.*

Keywords: *Language Learning Experience; Narrative Inquiry; Non-major English Student*

INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognised that English is the universal language learnt and communicated by many countries around the world. English is not only learnt for academic purposes but also occupational ones. To illustrate, it is learnt to support individuals in developing their personal, academic, and professional lives. This language undoubtedly opens thousands of opportunities for many people to gain a lot of information in this modern era and to socialise effortlessly in a global context. As the most important worldwide language, English has also become a compulsory subject in developing countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Brazil, Argentina, Bahrain, Brunei, Bulgaria, Honduras, etc. (Yulia, 2013). In the Indonesian context, introducing English to students from elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education is highly demanding. In Indonesia, it is easy to find many English courses helping students to develop their language skills. It is undeniable that there are many benefits in mastering English for the students' academic performance. In particular, the context of studying English as a foreign language encourages them to enhance their brainpower, boost memory and improve decision-making.

In the process of learning English, students need to use their thought consciously. Learning can be thought of as a change in students' behaviour and takes place as a result of students being engaged in educational experiences. Those experiences create constructs determining learners' perceptions, thinking, and actions. Learning is a process whereby concepts are constructed and continuously improved by experiences (Kolb, 1984). This means that changes are created in students' minds because of their learning experiences. For instance, when they think that learning English is complicated, they will increase their capability by learning hard and rehearsing. On the other hand, this construct might also discourage them from learning, making them too lazy to learn English.

This study centres on a non-major English student who loves to learn English. He won a couple of English essay competitions on a national scale, and he can beat English major college students in English tests (e.g. English essays, CBT, and TOEFL IPT). English is not fully learnt by him at his university, yet he can show his good competencies, becoming "The Outstanding Student" at National level. The experience of his learning English is interesting to investigate because it can reveal the construct created by his personal learning experiences. Lubis et.al. (2019, p. 109) suggest that Indonesian students would be more interested in learning English if they joined many English competitions or contests. This participant frequently took part in competitions, triggering his motivation to invigorate his English language skills.

Although abundant research focuses on how non-native speaking students learn English as a foreign language, and explores their English language learning activities over the last few decades (Boonkit, 2010; Lubis et al., 2019; Yaneva et al., 2017; Zhang & Zhang, 2021), probing non-major English students' learning experiences, notably in Indonesian higher education, remains scarce. To fill this void, the current study is aimed at investigating the experience of learning English among non-English majors in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students' Language Learning Experiences

As the conscious process of acquiring new knowledge and information, learning is valuable for students not only in formal but also in informal situations. Brown (2012) argues that learning is getting knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills into learners' minds.

As the conscious process of acquiring new knowledge and information, learning is valuable for students not only in formal but also in informal situations. Learning is the process of obtaining knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills into learners' minds. This activity can change people's behaviour as a result of being engaged in their educational experiences. In contrast to acquisition skills, learning can provide the opportunity to frequently gain, understand, and memorise knowledge in the mind. Learning is an experience to continue further activities for the sake of the development of knowledge and skill. Thus, experience is usually related to the process of learning because students can form their thoughts and

attitudes through experiencing such feelings, and thinking during the process of learning (Brown, 2012; Kohonen et al., 2014).

In the English learning context, there is a long history of investigating students' experiences while they are undergoing specific learning programmes – process and product research (Apriliyanti et al., 2021; Muhamad & Kiely, 2017; Siti Fatimah & Sulastrri, 2021). For example, Fang Fang 1 (2006, p. 117) reports that his learning experience is limited by traditional teaching. He adds that he needs inspiration and interest, without which his learning is held back. This is supported by Solak & Bayar (2015), who identify challenges to students' learning experience as method, approach, practice, and linguistic differences between the two languages. Finally, in Indonesia, Lubis et al., (2019, p. 109) state that some students express dissatisfaction with the teaching methods and tools used in their personal learning experience. They report that teachers who use technology in teaching English are better loved than those who do not. This is related to previous researchers' findings that the use of technology produces a different atmosphere which improves students' learning outcomes and experience (Aldiab et al., 2019; Fatimah et al., 2021; Krause, 2005; Saputra & Fatimah, 2018). This suggests that the construct of students' minds is influenced by many factors faced during their learning experience, such as teaching methods, classroom environment, teaching tools, etc.

Non-Major English Students' English Learning

Some researchers have investigated how non-English major students learn English in their colleges. In his study, Noora (2008, p. 42) states that non-English major students are motivated to learn English. They believe that having good capability in English can help them to communicate with foreigners, comprehend many English texts and influence their career development. This is supported by Supiah (2018) who states that most non-major English students do not feel afraid to study English. They realise that English is very useful not only for their academic purposes but also for their communication skills. Studying English for non-major English students usually has a specific need in which the purposes will usually be related to their major. Particularly in a university setting, lecturers usually provide English materials which can support their students' academic and occupational purposes in the future. Since their purpose in studying English is specific, needs analysis should be conducted to provide them with suitable materials and approaches.

Zone of Proximal Development by Vygotsky

This sociocultural theory was originated by Vygotsky in the 1920s. He argued that social interaction plays a central role in human cognitive development. Vygotsky supposed that there are two levels in the learning process: first, through interaction with others; second, the idea that the potential for cognitive development is limited to a “zone of proximal development” (ZPD). This zone is the area that cognitively prepares students for exploration, but they need additional help and social interaction to comprehend. Some strategies for supporting the intellectual knowledge and skills of learners are collaborative learning, discourse, modelling and scaffolding (Fear, 2014).

ZPD is an area of skills or knowledge a student cannot address on her own, but she can do so with the help or guidance of someone else. It represents a skill level just above the student's current position. ZPD is often depicted as a series of concentric circles. The smallest circle is the set of skills a student can learn on her own, without any help; next is the ZPD, or skills a student would not be able to master on her own but can do so with the help of a teacher or peer. Beyond that are skills the student cannot yet grasp, even with help.

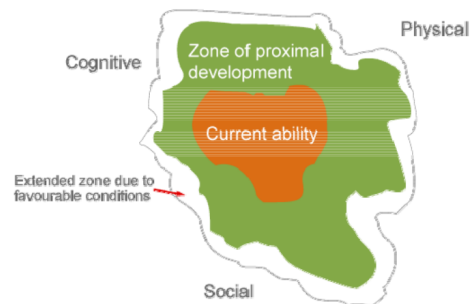


Figure 1. *Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development.*

RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilises narrative inquiry as its research method. As a qualitative study method, this approach aims to scrutinise and obtain value or meaning from stories or events (Barkhuizen et al., 2013; Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; Clandinin et al., 2007). Fatimah et al. (2021, p. 6) suggest that this method focuses on investigating human life experiences in order to gain value from the events of the story. Narrative inquiry uses stories as research data and utilises storytelling as a tool for data analysis. This study involves a college student at a university in Indonesia in the fifth semester of his Economic Development major. During this time, his many achievements included the “Outstanding Student” title at National level and he even beat English major college students in English tests such as English essays, computer-based tests (CBT), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and the English Proficiency Test (EPT).

To collect the data, an interview was conducted to obtain his personal experience of English language learning. The interview was semi-structured so that its flow could be controlled. This type of interview was chosen because it allows the researcher to investigate more deeply the interviewee's responses and to develop the exchange (Alshenqeti, 2014).

To analyse the data, narrative analysis was employed. This involves eliciting and documenting story-as-lived-experience artifacts (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). Stories can be obtained through interviews, diaries and biographies. In this study, narrative data about the student's English learning experience was compiled by the researchers after the interview. (Labov & Waletzky, n.d.) concept was used in the process of analysis. This involves; 1) abstract (a summary of the story) - this includes the introductory section of the story. As a brief summary of the subject's experiences, this part of the analysis is aimed at sparking the readers' interest by focusing on explaining how the conclusion to the story is relevant to the research

question in this study; 2) Orientation provision (a context to orient the reader) - in orientation, the researcher explains the setting of the story. The narrative data will introduce and describe the characters in the story and the setting – place and timeframe within the data; 3) complicating action (skeleton, plot, or an event that causes a problem) - at this step, the researcher explains the actual events that become the main focus of the study. This includes physical actions and spoken statements provided as narrative data; 4) evaluation (evaluative comments on events, justification of its telling, or the meaning that the teller gives to an event) - this focuses on the point or reason behind the data, and might be clearly stated or implied; 5) result of resolution (resolution of the story and the conflict) - this step mainly concludes the story, narrating the final action; and 6) coda (bringing the narrator or the listener back to the present) - this means the narrator’s statement and its relevance to the story. This step does not necessarily appear in the narrative data. It may be presented explicitly along with the other data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To generate meaning from the recursive chain of events, the researcher organised the five nascent key elements of the student’s English language learning experience into the following sequences: (1) abstract, (2) orientation providing, (3) complicating action, (4) evaluation, (5) result of resolution, (6) coda (Labov & Waletzky, n.d.).

Abstract: I think English is unique.

The participant is a 20-year-old male Development Economics student at one of the universities in West Java, Indonesia. He originates from Tasikmalaya. He is majoring in Development Economics towards attaining a bachelor’s degree. When he was a child, he regarded English as unique.

Table 1. Excerpt 1

Excerpt 1

“When I was a kid, I used to think that English is unique because my friends thought English is kind of hard to study. They didn’t understand English, but I did. So, it gave me a happiness that I could... you know... show off to my friend that I can understand English. **And my teacher told me that I have to study English if I want to reach my dream. So, I think that is the uniqueness of English. That is why I want to study English. I know this language is unique, this language will bring me to a good prospect.** I know my dreams will be reached if I can speak English” (The participant, 5 September 2020. Author’s translation.)

Based on the excerpt above, the participant thinks English is unique because he already knows that this language will be very useful to him in getting higher education (see the sentences in bold type). He was also motivated by a teacher who told him that he had to study English if he wanted to reach his dream. This was why he started to learn English at elementary level. According to Vygotsky in (Eun & Lim, 2009), interaction in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) between the teacher-instructor and the teacher-students has a great impact on the students’

motivation. In this regard, the participant was motivated by his teacher to start to study English.

Orientation providing: I used to study English by watching some English cartoons, listening to English songs, many media related to English.

The participant is an active student from the economics development department in the Faculty of Economics and Business. He started formal schooling at kindergarten in Bandung, continuing his study to elementary school up to fourth grade before spending the last two years of elementary level at a school in Ciamis. He enrolled in junior high school in Cimaragas and finished his high school degree at a vocational school in Banjar. He continued his studies majoring in economics development at a university in Tasikmalaya. The participant has a good informal English score record; at elementary school his English average score was 95-100, at junior high his average was 90-95, and he attained an 80-95 average at high school. His first languages were Sundanese and Bahasa Indonesia with no English environment, but he has had a strong desire to learn the English language ever since kindergarten.

Table 2. Excerpt 2

Excerpt 2

“I used to study English by watching some English cartoons, listening to English songs, many media related to English. **At kindergarten, we used to watch cartoons that tell us about animals, numbers, days, and so on. Also, we used to sing a lot of songs such as the song about the alphabet, colours, and fruits.** So, that is the factor that made me learn English until now. And oh yeah one thing, I used to play card games in English. That made me familiar with English.” (The participant, 5 September 2020. Author’s translation.)

Based on the excerpt above, when he was a child, he was in an environment that supported him in learning English. He used to watch cartoons in English and listen to English songs (see the sentences in bold). He watched cartoons about animals, numbers, and days. He sang songs about the alphabet, colours, and fruits, which made him familiar with English. This relates to Vygotsky’s concept of mediation. He states that children find it easier to remember words through the use of pictures (Eun & Lim, 2009). Movies and songs could mediate the student to remember lessons, and further mediation for him might be the introduction of a support device into an activity that then links humans to the world of objects or to the world of behaviour. This allowed him to learn the language by watching or reading and understanding the language. In addition, visual aids such as pictures, cards, or realia, help language acquisition. The factor that made the participant interested in English was the treatment he had experienced from the beginning of his studies. This proves that acquisition comes in a “natural order”, as well as demonstrating how the participant received second language “input” for his linguistic competence (Gulzar et al., 2014; Krashen, 1982).

Complicating action: I had a dream, to become an Indonesian ambassador

Even though he was not an English major student, the participant’s relationship with the English language was close enough to put his English skills at

the same level as that of general English students, or even higher than some of them. Especially since he has been pursuing a college education, he has not made an English major his priority, despite his love for, and skills in, English. He rather chose economic development as the major at his university. Despite being an economics major, he still is involved in many English events and competitions that require a higher level of English skills, and he competes with other students who have good English skills. The fact that he does not come from an English language background – and therefore is in a less supportive environment in terms of English language use – does not make him insecure or even inclined to step back from competition that can prove how far he has honed his English skills.

Table 3. Excerpt 3

Excerpt 3

“Once, I have met a stranger guess coming from abroad when I was a kid. I kind of forget who is he. **But he made me think to study English because at the moment I didn’t understand the word he’s saying.** And then I start to realise there are other languages, not only Bahasa or Sundanese. So, the more I grew up, the more I understand that I have to go travel around the world. **I started to have goals, like being an Indonesian ambassador, or I want to continue my school majoring in International Relations. I want to study aboard.**” (The participant, 5 September 2020. Author’s translation.)

As illustrated by the excerpt above, Krashen delineates three decisive aspects for fruitful learning of a second language. They are confidence, learning motivation, and a low level of nervousness. These phenomena affect the participant. He became motivated to study English at a time when he barely knew that there was a language that was spoken by strangers. He also understood that this language would bring him to higher education. That factor in his learning English has lasted from his childhood to the present day. Moreover, this is supported by his autonomy, because he takes responsibility for his own learning. This skill is influential as one of the factors in students’ academic success (Fatimah, 2019).

Evaluation: I joined a private English course, an English club, and the English debating society.

Even if his life journey does not feature a supportive environment for him to learn and be able to use the English language properly, the participating student has still been able to manage his development by creating his own benign environment in which to learn, practice, and maintain his learning motivation for the English language. He tried to find a different perspective on learning English, for example learning through cartoons on television or video, through an animal video which uses an English dubbing or subtitles, or even joining the English learning community despite his major being different.

When he was in junior high school, he registered for a private English course at a private class for one year. After that he never took any English courses, yet still he has good English proficiency. When he was in vocational high school, he won first place at the regional level and second place at the national level in the “Secretary Student Competence Competition”, a competition about customer

services, prima services, and writing letters in full English. In college, he joined an English debating society. He tried to associate with his friends and lecturer due to his limitation in understanding English.

Table 4. Excerpt 4

Excerpt 4

“I have joined the English debating society during the first semester. I met with friends who are good at English so that we could study together. **We usually discuss how to become a good debater.** We trained our speaking skills by trying to have a speech in five until seven minutes. We are doing it twice a week. So yeah, this club helps me in learning English. Also, I have been reading literature books in English about economics. **I read books for preparation if I'm facing an English test. I used to do some 15 numbers of exercises for each chapter, then I finish the other 15 numbers the next day. I studied two chapters per day.**” (The participant, 5 September 2020. Author's translation.)

Based on the excerpt above, the participant studied English and discussed it through joining the English debating society. We can conclude that group work could develop students' cognition by their discussing and interacting with one another – students were discussing English with other students; they were talking about the correct grammar and structure to make a good sentence. One student asked, and the others responded. This is related to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that social interaction becomes the central role in the expansion of cognition. The interaction among the students might be the influential motivation in human learning development (Eun & Lim, 2009).

Furthermore, the participant developed his own way to figure out the challenges of learning English. He joined the English club so that he could meet other students in order to study together. He has schedules for study. He focuses on finishing tasks. Therefore, his English competence has improved.

Result: I won the “The Outstanding Student Undergraduate Programme 2020 University Level Selection”

When he was in his first year in college, the participant joined a national outstanding student competition called “Mahasiswa Berprestasi Program Sarjana” – The Outstanding Student Undergraduate Programme 2020 University Level Selection. This was hosted by the Education and Culture Ministry of Indonesia. He entered his papers and won first place. Lubis et al. (2018) state that experiencing contests or competitions triggers students' motivation to enhance their English skills.

Table 5. Excerpt 5

Excerpt 5

“Yeah alhamdulillah, thank God I won the first place of the outstanding student, my papers won the first place. There's this competition and my lecturer told me to apply, so yeah, I did it. I did the selections; I interviewed in English. **The selection is called the Outstanding Student Undergraduate Programme 2020 University Level Selection.** It was held by the Education and Culture Ministry of Indonesia. It was great. **My paper is titled geology resort and**

tourism. It's about a programme of geo-tourism. It's about a tourist attraction near my house" (The participant, 5 September 2020. Author's translation.)

Coda: My environment is supporting me.

Table 6. Excerpt 6

Excerpt 5

And the last factor is I think my own family. Thankfully I had a supportive family, you know, when my parents know that I'm studying English, they supported me, they gave me everything I need to study English, such as books, dictionaries, and so on. So in short, all of the factors are about the environment. **The environment that I got in school and at home is supporting me in learning English. I live in a good society, like, some of my neighbours have a higher education, sometimes they teach me.** So yeah, it's all about the environment. (The participant, 5 September 2020. Author's translation.)

He studied almost every day with different learning styles. He has a good environment supporting him to study better. For example, he went to a private kindergarten that already offered English lessons, and there he started to have an interest in studying English. When he went to junior high school, he joined the private English course, and furthermore, he joined the English debating society in college. He has made friends who have the same interest in learning English. This evidence show that students' achievement is influenced by external factors such as peer support, family, and the classroom environment (Gherasim et al., 2012).

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the English language experience of a non-English major college student at an Indonesian university. It contributes theoretically to existing theories around English language learning experiences, particularly in the EFL context. The researcher describes the English language learner's experience in terms of three main points, as follows: the participant's environment, his motivation, and his learning styles. The participant has experienced a really helpful environment that has supported him in studying English. He used to have media-related encounters in English such as watching a cartoon or listening to English music. He made use of all things related to English at his school, and these factors motivated him to study more and more. He studied routinely, and he had his schedule for study. He has used different learning styles, such as reading books and articles. He also adopts visual styles, such as looking at illustrations, and auditory styles, such as listening to English songs. From the findings, it is found that these factors have had a major influence on the his success in learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, it is suggested to English teachers, especially those who teach non-major English college students, to strongly emphasise independent learning and engagement in the context of learning English based on students' interests and learning styles.

In this study, there are limitations that need to be addressed in developing future research. Since this study focuses on narrating one non-major English student's learning experiences. Future researchers may conduct further qualitative

studies in order to deeply investigate factors contributing to non-major English students' learning success, or to analyse their strategies and challenges in learning English as a foreign language.

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