

## Factors Affecting English Language Learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Context: A Literature Review Study

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### Abstract

*This study is part of larger research investigating students' preferred activities in learning English both inside and outside the classrooms in English as a Foreign Language Context (EFL). Some relevant issues regarding the theories of teaching and learning English were presented and reviewed in this study. This literature review study provided a brief snapshot to the importance of knowing the students' preferred activities in their efforts to learn English as a foreign language in Indonesia. This review also described the researcher's experience in learning and teaching English as the background of this study. In addition, it summarized the significance of the study to improve the English teaching and learning practice at University level in Indonesia, in particular, for non-English Department students.*

**Keywords:** *EFL, Learning Strategies, Learners' Beliefs, Students' Learning Style*

### 1. Introduction

This paper is part of larger study identifying students' preferred activities in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The identification of preferred learning activities is important to improve the English teaching practice at the faculty of Teacher Training and education of Jambi University where I am teaching English. The university is located in Jambi province, in Sumatera Island.

It is worth bearing in mind that as an English teacher, I find teaching English is not easy. I often feel unsatisfied with my teaching practice in the classroom. There are several reasons that make teaching English difficult. Firstly, I have to deal with large classes in which more than fifty students in a class. Even though the definition of large class in language learning classes context vary (Wright, 2005), this ratio is not ideal for a language classroom. Secondly, not all students who attend the English classes are motivated. English subject is a compulsory subject that means students have to learn the language for examination purposes and exposure to English is only for about two hours a week. Their low motivation and less English learning hours become an obstacle not only for me to teach English but also for them to learn it. Thirdly, the teaching focus of English at university level for non-English department

students is on reading skill (Sawir, 2005; Sugirin, 1999; Setiyadi, 2001). This may be because most of the textbooks used in universities are written in English beside Indonesian. So, the emphasis of teaching is on English grammar and vocabulary. This teaching emphasis is based on the assumption that students will understand an English text properly if they know the structure of English and have an adequate vocabulary. One consequence of this is that the teaching of other skills such as speaking, writing, and listening, are ignored (Sugirin, 1999).

The purpose of this literature review study is to present relevant studies in the areas of English language learning in terms of factors that may affect the ways learners learn a foreign language in international context. This study reviewed some research investigating factors that affect English language learning such as characteristics of good language learners, learners' learning strategies, and learners' beliefs about language learning as well as students' learning style.

### 2. Method

This literature review use systematic literature review method. The research method consists of identify, assess, and interpret all findings on a research topic, to answer research questions (research question) that have been previously determined.

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### 3. Discussion

#### Learners' characteristics

A large number of studies have been conducted to investigate the characteristics of good language learners (Setiyadi, 2001, Mistar, 2001, Bremner, 1999). Good language learners can be described as successful user of language learning strategies. Rubin and Thompson (1982) have come to the characteristics of good language learners. Good language learners find their own way of learning, organize information about language, are creative finding the rule of grammar and words, are active in practicing the language inside and outside the classroom, make errors help them in learning, use contextual clue to help them in comprehension, learn to make intelligent guesses, learn certain tricks to keep the conversations going, and learn different style of speech and writing and learn to vary their language according to the formality of the situation.

A study conducted by Bremner (1999) suggests that most good language learners in China prefer to use metacognitive and compensation strategies in their learning process. A similar study by Nisbet et al (2005) also finds that more students chose metacognitive strategies than other language learning strategies. In addition, a study which was conducted in one university in Indonesia by Setiyadi (2001) has found the similar results that metacognitive strategies are largely used by good language learners in Indonesia. More detail discussion about language learning strategies will be presented in the next section.

#### Learners' Language Learning Strategies

The success of foreign language learning depends on the strategies used by learners. Setiyadi et al (2002) said that each strategy learners may use has different contribution to the success of language learning. In their study, they categorized strategies used by language learners into metacognitive and cognitive strategies.

#### *Metacognitive Strategies*

The term 'metacognitive' used in Setiyadi et al's study refers to the previous studies by O'Malley et al (1985) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990). While 'strategies' refers to self-directed learning in which learners take control on their own efforts to achieve particular goal in their language learning. So, metacognitive strategies in their study related to 'planning, directing, monitoring, and correcting' the process of acquiring another language. Setiyadi, et al (2002) found:

"In speaking, the students used correcting, directing, and evaluating while they used directing, monitoring and evaluating in listening. In reading they used

evaluating and monitoring and in writing they used monitoring and evaluating". (P.3)

The findings are based on the responses given by the participants of his survey on language learning strategies in a tertiary English Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia. Some of the responses are as follows:

" I try to correct my mistakes that I produce orally" (speaking)

" I listen to what I say to practice my listening" (listening)

" I check and recheck my understanding after reading a passage" (reading)

" I rewrite my composition by correcting the mistakes that I notice" (writing)

Moreover, Oxford and Crookall (1989) state that metacognitive strategy is used to encourage initiation of the learners on how they will learn a language and take control toward its process.

#### **Cognitive Strategies**

Cognitive strategies focus on how language learners cope with 'linguistic information' in the learning process. Setiyadi, et al (2002) revealed that strategies which are categorized into cognitive strategies include translating a first language into a target language (speaking), watching English TV program (listening), analysing sentence pattern (reading), writing what is in learners' mind (writing). These activities belong to 'deep level cognitive strategies'.

While in surface level cognitive strategies, learners are practicing speaking with others, try to understand each word in order to understand the passage (listening), read the passage aloud (reading) and translate word for word (writing). The interesting finding is that there are some differences strategies used by learners in deep and surface level on the same skills of English. The learners used translating strategies in speaking skill for deep level while for surface level; they used translating word for word in writing skill. The extent of this finding needs to explore and be confirmed with other future studies on language learning strategies.

In addition, Chamot (1987) who investigated the same categories used in Setiyadi's study revealed that intermediate learners used more metacognitive strategies than beginner. It shows that cognitive strategies are the preliminary step taken by beginning learner before they are able to be more self directed learner by implementing metacognitive strategies.

In Chamot's study, she points out that 'social-affective strategies' – which did not include in Setiyadi's work-- also has contribution to the notion of language learners' strategies. It suggests that learners use this strategy to obtain feedback from other learners about their language learning progress they made and ask for clarity, for example about pronunciation,

speaking and so forth to their English teacher. This strategy is more about person to person relationship which is considered as a helpful factor for learners' effort of learning.

Furthermore, Oxford and Crookalls (1989) found that good learners can use a large number of different strategies such as technique for knowing, organizing, evaluating, and cooperating with other learners in the learning process and they also found out that there are different strategies used high level learners and low level learners in learning a language. These differences are in relation to what Setiyadi et al (2002) classified as metacognitive and cognitive strategies.

### **Learners' Belief about Language learning**

Belief about language learning may affect in the way students learn foreign language (Horwitz, 1988). She further gives an example that students who believe that learning a foreign language is the matter of vocabulary mastery, they will spend most their time by memorizing vocabularies and make practice of them to construct a sentence. In other words belief about language learning holds an important part that students will consider about, when they choose what strategies or techniques they may use in learning a foreign language. Their autonomy to decide what aspect of language, process and evaluation constituting it is a factor of the success of learners in learning a foreign language.

In her study, Horwitz points out that most students (83%) believed that everyone can learn a foreign language. Such belief can encourage students to be more confident in the area of their studies –language study. The subjects of her study are first semester language students of Texas University also believed that learning a foreign language means learning how to cope with translation, grammar rules, and vocabulary. Her findings are supported by Sawir (2002). According to Sawir, the learners of English pay more attention on grammar accuracy. In her studies, one learner said 'I think I have problem with grammar when I want to speak with somebody, because I have to think about tense, is that right or wrong?'

In her quantitative study, Horwitz (1988) used 'The belief About Language Learning Inventory' (BALLI) as the instrument to gather the data. The instrument is assigned to assess some aspects of students' belief in language learning. These aspects are 'difficulty in language learning, foreign language aptitude, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation and expectation. Since the subjects of her study are first semester language students so the result may not necessarily apply to other subjects who have been through English instructional practice for some time. In

other words, the result might be able to represent the beliefs hold by beginning students only.

Another study conducted by Sawir (2002) points out that English learners believe that they will learn English very well in the place where the language input and exposure are adequately provided. It suggests that English speaking countries, for example Australia, USA, and UK are the best place to improve the learners' ability, particularly on speaking skill. This belief may arise as a result of the learners as subjects in her study are coming from Indonesia, the country where English is taught as a foreign language. The position of English here is only a school subject not as the language instruction in education or in everyday life. It might be different if the subjects are coming from countries such as Singapore, India, and Malaysia where English has been used in education setting as a language instruction even in their everyday life.

Furthermore, in investigating beliefs about language learning to three Indonesian learners, Sawir (2002) used Horwitz's (1988) 'Beliefs about language learning inventory' (BALLI) which has been modified based on the purposes of her study. She found similarly what Horwitz(1988) found in the pervious study that keep practicing and repeating in language learning is an important key to be successful language learner. Since, Sawir's study has focused only on three Indonesian learners. The findings can not be generalized to all Indonesian learners. She recommends more comprehensible studies will be conducted in the future will involve more Indonesian learners as the participants.

Moreover, Wenden (1987) who conducted a study investigating learners' belief about how to be a successful language learner revealed that language learners hold a belief that opportunity to use the language in real communication is the best path in learning a foreign language. Next, Wenden points out that 'practice' of the target language are highly recommended. One of 25 language learners being interviewed in her study said: '*if you are here (in America) you must speak.....you have to do everything in English, practice, that is the secret.*' This findings seems to be a proponent of what Sawir (2002) have investigated. She further suggests that learning strategies used by learners are consistently reflection of their beliefs about language learning. What she is trying to say that what learners believe about language learning will affect the choices they make in using the strategies in learning a foreign language. For sure there is significant relationship between students' belief and students' learning strategies.

In addition, Horwitz (1987) points out that learners' belief about language learning depends on their understanding of what language is and these aspects will

contribute to the language learning strategies they might use. Moreover, Sawir (2002) in her case study described what three Indonesian learners think about English revealed that choices learners make in using language learning strategies depends on what they think about language learning.

Others support this notion and conclude that the students' beliefs about language learning will affect their way of learning (Horwitz, 1987, 1988, Wenden, 1987, and Sawir, 2002).

### Students' Learning Styles

Learning style refers to any individual preferred activities or ways of learning (Willing, 1988b). While Richards and Lockhart (1994) point out that belief which learners hold about language learning are related to cognitive style or learning style. In addition, Schmeck (1983) defines learning style as the product derived from the processing of information through activities that individuals prefer to engage in when confronted with learning tasks. Based on those definitions, learning style is individuals' preferred ways of processing information to cope with various learning tasks.

The ways people learn is different from one to another. Richards and Lockhart (1994) argued that learning style will affect the ways people respond to learning situation. Different learning styles will be reflected in different responses. For example, some people feel comfortable when they work alone, while some like working in a group. Some people prefer using visual cues and writing notes to remember things while others like auditory learning and simply can remember any information only by listening to them. Some people will be able to focus on several tasks at the same time, while others can only focus on one task at a time, and so forth.

Furthermore, learning style has some dimensions that closely relate to the ways students interact in learning both inside and outside classroom. One of learning style dimensions is field independence and field dependence. Students' cultural background may affect their learning style as Willing (1988b) points out that different cultures will shape different individual's learning style. Willing further gives an example that individuals belong to a social group which value individualization and autonomy will produce individuals who are identified *field independence*, while individuals who are from extended family which highly value cooperative works will tend to be *field dependence*.

In terms of English learning strengths, field independent learners prefer studying grammar, reading English text books and newspaper, and studying alone. They like finding their own mistakes and solving the problem set by the teacher. On the other hand, field dependant learners like studying by using games,

pictures, films, videos and cassettes. They like talking in pairs and practicing English outside the classroom (Willing, 1988).

Another dimension of learning style is sensory modality which refers to the ways students take information (Reid, 1987). This modality include visual, Auditory, and kinesthetic. The learners belong to visual group tend to use visual channel in their learning. Visual learners like reading in the target language, watching movies, and using various visual stimulation such as television and pictures (Hoang, 1988). Auditory learners prefer using the oral-aural learning channel. They enjoy discussions, conversation and group work. Meanwhile, kinesthetic learners prefer using movement in their learning. They like Total Physical response activities, games, and role plays. According to Campbell et al (2004), kinesthetic learners will use their body in their learning activity and they prefer to work with concrete and real life experiences.

### Individual Preferences in Learning English

According to Richards and Lockhart (1994) some aspects of teaching and learning can be investigated by administering a questionnaire. The questionnaire used in this study is intended to elicit learners' preferred activities for different kinds of learning inside and outside class room. In doing so, the selection of each item in the questionnaire is based on several areas of possible learning activities that students may do in their learning of English. Willing (1988) assumed that learners would be able to express individual preferences in learning English in at least the following six different areas:

- Different sorts of (classroom) activities
- Different modes of teacher behaviour
- Different ways of being grouped for learning activities
- Different aspects of language which need emphasis
- Different sensory-modality preferences
- Different modes of learning on one's own outside class (Willing, 1988a.p.101)

Based on the six areas suggested by Willing (1988a), the items of the questionnaire used in this study are intended to gain information about students' preferences for particular kinds of classroom activities, particular types of teacher behaviour, particular grouping arrangements, particular aspects of language which need emphasis, particular sensory modes, and particular kinds of out side classroom activities.

### 4. Summary

This study reviewed some related literatures about the factors affecting language learning. The roles of learning and acquisition were described in this study

with regards to learning English as a foreign language context. The roles of teachers in second language classroom were also discussed as well as promoting students' activities outside classroom. Some factors affecting English language learning which include learner's characteristics, language learning strategies, learners' beliefs about language learning, and students' learning style were also discussed in this chapter. This literature review study will bring insights to the readers about some relevant factors that might contribute to the success of language learning in English as a Foreign Language context. For English teachers, this study will be a useful information to improve their English teaching Practice in the classroom. For english learners, the study will inform what kind of activities that may suit them in improving their learning based on factors that might affect them to learn English both inside and outside the classrooms.

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