

# Unsustainable English Learning: The Factors Inhibiting Retention of ‘English as a Foreign Language’ (EFL) in an Indonesian University

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This study aims to analyse the unsustainable experience of English learning for ‘English as a Foreign Learner’ (EFL) students. To determine the main factors, this descriptive qualitative study selected 120 student-participants using an opportunistic sampling technique. Data was collected using observations, questionnaires, and interviews. An instructive model technique analysed the data via three components: Reduction, presentation, and verification of the data. The study found three main factors contributing to students' experience of English learning as unsustainable: Students had a lack of basic knowledge in the English language; Appropriate materials were not provided in the classroom, and; The classroom environment was lacking support enough to expose and enhance students’ basic knowledge and skill level.

**Keywords:** *unsustainable English learning, EFL learners*

## Introduction

The English language (English) is a global 'Lingua Franca' (Abdullah & Chaudhary, 2012; Pakir, 2009). Of the many languages in the world, Indonesia only requires English be developed outside of the Indonesian language itself. Most countries in Asia such as the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia also use English as the ‘Medium of Instruction’ with English being their second language after their national language. English is the most commonly used communication tool globally. English has become an international language used by most communities in the world. By mastering English as a foreign language (EFL), students can grasp the world of education and the business world. Nunan (2003), Pennycook (2017), and Perkin (2003) state that English plays a vital role in almost all fields of life, such as Communication, Commerce, Economy, Politics, Education, Science, and Technology.



In a modern world full of challenges and competition it is advised to not only have a high level of education but also to acquire special skills. Arguably, one of the skills most needed now is knowledge of the English language. There are many benefits for students with excellent English language skills such as increased opportunities for securing a job, for studying abroad, for easily understanding technology, for safe global interaction, and more. Where English is a global language, students who want to rise to the challenges of the modern world competitively need to master English.

Learning English as a foreign language is potentially difficult. Students experience difficulties learning a language that they are not familiar with. There are complex problems and difficulties that students experience during learning English especially as foreign learners, experiencing varying teaching styles, learning in a specific educational setting outside of daily life (Baresh, Ali, & Darmi (2019), Cook (2016), Hoa (2016) and Megawati 2019).

Several studies show people in countries using English as a second language or a foreign language, tend to have difficulty mastering English (Abdullah & Chaudhary, 2012; Gobel, Thang, Sidhu, Oon, & Chan, 2013; Nadia, 2011) given, as a foreign language, English is not easily understood. There are several factors that further limit learning potential such as low motivation, incorrect learning techniques, and unsustainable learning.

To increase the chances of success for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students learning English, they might study continuously - both guided and independently (Phuket & Bidin 2016; Slavin 1996). It is arguably not enough to listen to the teacher's explanation. An effort to repeat English or practice outside the school is likely essential, as is making a habit of practicing in real life outside the classroom. Phuket & Bidin (2016) and Slavin (1996) assert that to master the English language, EFL students need to learn English continually, and practice it in their daily life as their constant.

In Indonesia, many students fail to master English even though they have studied for almost six years from junior high school to university. They study English only in the classroom and rely on the teachers' guiding. Most of them study English only to fulfill class obligations. To be a success in English, it's not enough just to acquire theoretical knowledge in the classroom. Still, it also requires practice that must be carried out continually. Therefore, these two elements must be done effectively by students to master English. Researchers at *Universitas Hamzanwadi*, observed that one of the dominant factors in a student failing to master English is a lack of effort by students to sustain learning and practice individually outside the classroom. Based on the above observation, the researchers are interested in analysing, in particular, the unsustainable nature of English learning for EFL students at *Universitas Hamzanwadi*. This study aims to can identify factors that contribute to this unsustainable English learning.

## **Methods**

This study used a descriptive qualitative research design to analyse factors determining why English learning for EFL learners is unsustainable at *Universitas Hamzanwadi* (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2018; Carroll & Bailey, 2016; Sugiyono, 2008).

### ***Participants***

There were 50 participants of *Universitas Hamzanwadi* from three different faculties (Faculty of Education, Faculty of Social and Economics, and Faculty of Mathematics and Science) who voluntarily participated in this study. They were taken through an opportunistic sampling technique (see also Gokhale, Nair, & Chaudhuri, 2016; Hamada & Ryan, 2016; Sugiyono, 2008; Wilson, 2016). The participating students were available at the time this study was conducted and fitted the criteria of the research. (They were not students of the English department though they have all taken English subjects, and willing volunteered to participate).

### ***Data Collection***

#### ***The Instrument of the Study***

There were three main instruments used in collecting the data: Observation, questionnaire, and in-depth interview (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2001; Milena, Dainora, & Alin, 2008; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Romero, Kwan, & Suchman, 2019). Before collecting the data, the researchers prepared an observation guide and a questionnaire. The interview protocol ensured the data obtained was valid.

First, the researchers constructed a questionnaire related to (1) participants' motivation in learning English, (2) their experience in learning English, (3) materials they have learned, (4) lecturers' strategies in lesson delivery, and (5) their perspectives on how supported they felt in the learning environment. The questionnaire consisted of 18 items and had five scales (strongly agree, agree, moderate, disagree, strongly disagree). The researchers also developed an interview protocol as an interview guide and in-depth interviews to attain more data and cross-check the validity of the information gathered in the questionnaire. so the contract was almost similar to the survey.

#### ***The Technique for Collecting Data***

Firstly, in collecting the data, the researchers distributed the prepared questionnaire to the participants. After completing the survey, the researchers interviewed all participants individually within 7-10 minutes. depending on the response of the participants related to unsustainable English learning. The researchers conducted interviews in Indonesian to avoid

misunderstanding and they were informal and friendly. Interviews were video-recorded, and the interview protocol controlled all. The researchers compared the results of the questionnaire with the interview section to obtain valid data and to determine the factors of unsustainable English language by EFL learners.

### ***Data Analysis***

In analysing the data, under a descriptive qualitative research design, the researchers followed the staged process of categorization, description, and synthesis (see also Ary et al., 2018; Cooper, Hedges, & Valentine, 2019; Liao & Hitchcock, 2018; Mihas, 2019; Williams, 2007). Here, the researchers processed the collected data and placed it according to specific categories, patterns, and units. In this case, after the researchers collected the data, they clarified the data to find out the results of the study.

### **Results and Discussion**

The researchers observed the EFL students outside and inside the classroom for two months from March to April 2019 at *Universitas Hamzanwadi*. During the teaching and learning process, most students were found to use Indonesian to communicate both with their friends and lecturers. Also, they appeared to only attend to learning English when their lecturers attend classes. That is, they learned English only to abort their obligations in the classroom.

In addition to observing students' activities in the classroom, the researchers noted student activities outside the classroom. Outside the school, students continued to interact with their friends using the Indonesian language. They did not appear to be trying to use English to communicate on-campus. After class, students did not appear to be attempting to repeat or practice the English material they had learned in class.

After collecting data by observation and questionnaire, the researcher conducted an interview(s) on March – April 2019. These interviews aimed to strengthen the researchers understanding of student responses to the questionnaire and the observation data. The researchers conducted in-depth structured interviews with 18 questions related to the learning of English that took place during the first semester. Most students (41 students) said that they had never studied English independently outside the classroom. They also said that they never repeat or practice the English material provided during class, and they never discuss and practice English afterward.

Furthermore, the participants indicated that several factors made their English learning unsustainable, as in they struggled to apply their learning and synthesise it in or beyond the classroom experience. They did not have enough sustained ability to understand the English material independently. They noted that they need a facilitator or tutor to explain the content.

Furthermore, what they learned during the lecturing process focused on TOEFL and IELTS material. For example, the lecturer would start by teaching them difficult topics such as how to write an essay and then asks them to make an essay. They also noted having to perform data presentation orally. Further, they discussed encountering grammar that has a high level of difficulty. Of course, with their low level of English, these materials felt unsuitable for them.

The primary purpose of the current study has been to find out which factors render English learning unsustainable for EFL learners. After the data were collected and analysed, three main factors were found to contribute to EFL learners experiencing learning that was not sustained into their daily lives: Lack of basic knowledge and skills in English presented during learning programs, inappropriate provision of teaching and learning materials by educators, and an unsupported environment.

Many scholarship opportunities require the TOEFL/IELTS standard. As a result, some study programs in *Universitas Hamzanwadi* adopt the policy that English teaching draw on TOEFL and IELTS materials. However, this policy is counter-productive for students. The English language level of students outside the English language study program at *Universitas Hamzanwadi* is at a low level. To be able to understand TOEFL and IELTS materials, students must have English language skills at an intermediate level. Eckes & Althaus (2020); Hartono et al. (2017); Irawati & Widiyantari (2016) have shown that students will achieve a better score on TOEFL test when they have intermediate or advance English level. Here at *Universitas Hamzanwadi*, students with a low level of English are increasingly frustrated and convinced that English is indeed too (?) difficult to understand. Here, they will make no more attempts to study English either individually or by guidance. As a result, the risk that they will fail to master English increases.

Students believe that mastering English is very beneficial, however, this study has found the experience of learning English in the classroom is so difficult for many that they will potentially be inhibited in their success in the study of English. Eiminating their motivation is predicted to focus them into their curriculum-based Study Program, turning them away from their English language development, unmotivated. Motivation is a potent tool in achieving specific goals (Ahmad 2019, Stronge 2018). Ahmad et al. (2019) and Stronge (2018) asserted that in learning English, motivation has an important role. By arousing motivation, students will be stimulated to use their potential constructively and productively to achieve goals, and these goals are considered as needs that must be met.

In addition to motivation, the environment also has a significant role to play in helping the process of learning English for EFL learners. The environment can increase students' motivation, improving the process of mastering English quickly. Students who live in a situation where the Indonesian language is used the majority of times, of course, will find it more challenging to learn English and perhaps, find themselves less motivated. This challenge

is understood to be related to the limitations of practicing language skills on a daily basis. Based on the results of the interviews, most of the participants said that they had never exercised nor used English to communicate because most of them did not understand the English language enough, and that their environment did not trigger them to learn and master English. There is a lack of activities in student curriculum-based study programs for English learning. For example, applying such activities as the English Study Club or English Zone may trigger students to learn English and use the language English more while undertaking their curriculum-based programs.

These findings are supported by other research (e.g. Kozhevnikova, 2019) Kormos & Csizér, 2008; Sugita McEown, Sawaki, & Harada, 2017; Ulfa & Bania, 2019). Students who live in an environment with a majority of others mastering English, will usually be more comfortable learning the language (Kozhevnikova, 2019); Kormos & Csizér, 2008; Sugita McEown, Sawaki, & Harada, 2017; Ulfa & Bania, 2019). Students will learn the language not only in the classroom but also in the surrounding environment. The more students use English, the more they will get accustomed and more comfortable mastering the English language.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that three main factors are determining of unsustainable English learning on EFL learners. Firstly, there was a low interest in education and mastery of English due to student focus being on their main study program curriculum-based subject which did not include an English learning component. Furthermore, the English study program teaching materials were inappropriate at the learning level, and so did not trigger the students to learn and master English further independently. The last factor was an unsupported environment. Students of English were not engaged by teaching staff in a way that exposed their individual knowledge and skill level.

Based on the results of this study, it is expected that the policymakers attempt to reduce the force of TOEFL or IELTS material upon students. The content is quite tricky and far from students' abilities and alienates students potentially leading to de-motivation. It is recommended that they are given access to a basic knowledge of English according to their current level and daily needs so that they are motivated to learn English further. By having the necessary strong English skills at a basic level they may better be able to develop their abilities independently and sustainably outside of the classroom. From here significant learning can occur.

Also, the non-English study program curriculum all students are engaged in at the university must design a learning environment that includes English activities. Providing these will trigger the students to learn and master English more successfully, and more sustainably into the future. The study program would do well to provide an increase in opportunities for students



to learn English by including a particular time for learning English and employing facilitators to assist.

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