

INVESTIGATING INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' LEARNING CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the students' lacks related to language skills in the English course context as it is an alternative learning place aside from school. It specifically examines the skill the students need to improve. The study was conducted in an English course in Semarang City, Indonesia. The research utilised a descriptive qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews of the course owner who is also the teacher. The findings reveal that there are some shortcomings of the students' language skills namely speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. Furthermore, the English course learning process, trying to improve the students' skills, ensures they can get a good grade in their school. The study concludes that these challenges the students' faced need to be considered by the school by having a more comprehensive learning practice in order to help students improve their language skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Having English proficiency is a crucial key in today's globalized world. English is a dominating language as the international language in every sector, such as businesses, academics, and technology (Xue & Zuo, 2013). It is not a big deal for English speaking countries. Otherwise, it is crucial and challenging at the same time for countries that have English as their foreign language like Indonesia (Sakhiyya, 2019). Although English is already taught in school, as a non-English speaking country, Indonesia still faces significant challenges in improving English proficiency among its students. Learning English in school seems unsatisfactory (Poedjiastutie, et. al, 2018).

In 2013, the Indonesian government implemented a mandatory 12-year education program in accordance with Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia and Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System (*Pasal 31 UUD Negara RI Tahun 1945 dan UU Nomor 20 Tahun 2003 tentang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional*). The 12-year

education program consists of Elementary School (*Sekolah Dasar*), Sekolah Menengah Pertama (*Junior High School*), and then Sekolah Menengah Atas (*Senior High School*). Every education level has challenges in learning English regarding the students. Motivational problems, method problems, and incompatibility materials are the common issues in Elementary School (Maili & Hestingsih, 2017; Sondakh & Sya, 2022). In Junior and Senior High School, speaking become the common challenge for the students (Muliana, 2020).

Therefore, English courses exist in order to help students improve their English skills (Tan, 2020). English courses are trying to fill the gap in conventional schools. Joining an English course is an alternative to learn English. For instance, when you feel struggling learning in school, and it seems not enough for you that you need more intensive learning outside the school, you can join an English course. There, they might have various materials and methods that school did not have to improve your English skills.

This study was conducted in an English course in Semarang. The English course is a public course that is open to any language learning purposes. There are private classes for intensive learning such as English test preparation, interview preparation, and any specific purposes that can be held by request. Besides, there are also regular classes for scholars starting from Elementary students, to Highschoolers. However, this study only focused on the regular classes and trying to find out the challenges the students faced in school or their lack of English skill, the other class is excluded as the students come from various backgrounds. As the students came from public schools, the findings of this study can reflect the lack of learning process in the school, moreover the national curriculum as it is the basis of the learning process in the public schools.

While previous studies have examined English language learning challenges in the school setting (Maili & Hestningsih, 2017; Muliana, 2020; Sondakh & Sya, 2022), this study aims to address a significant research gap in understanding the challenges faced by Indonesian students in learning English, particularly through the context of a private English course setting. This research focused on need analysis, specifically on students' lacks, which likely due to the perceived inadequacies of the conventional school curriculum and instruction. By investigating the experiences of these students, the study provides valuable insights into the specific areas where the school-based English language learning process falls short and how the English course is trying to fill this gap. The findings from this case study can inform policymakers, educators, and course providers on the areas that require greater attention and improvement to enhance the overall English proficiency of Indonesian students.

METHODOLOGY

The current study used a descriptive qualitative approach through an interview with the course owner who is also the teacher of the course, who has broad information regarding the course and the learning system. Interview was used as it is a powerful tool for obtaining qualitative data that provides a deeper understanding of participants' experiences (Castillo-Montoya, 2016), in this case the course owner. Firstly the authors made an appointment with the English course owner. Secondly, create a list of questions. Then, came at the agreed time. There, the authors greeted the owner and introduced themselves. Next, the author and the owner prepared for the interview. A phone was prepared to record the interview in audio format. Next, the recording of the interview was then analysed by listening to it to find the information. The information can be in the form of phrases, sentences, and words, then compiled in a table of analysis consisting of "Class" that is referred to the students' school class, "Transcript" referred to the transcription of the interview related to the information needed, time stamp of the recording is included, and the last is "Aspect of Language" that is referred to aspects of the language skill such as speaking, writing, listening, grammar, and vocabulary. Furthermore, the interview was using Bahasa Indonesia as it can be easier to communicate the ideas and information vice versa. Moreover, the interview was talking broadly about the English course like the background, the management system, the learning material, students' challenges, etc. However, this paper will only focus on the students' challenges, specifically on the regular classes, as it seemingly can reflect the general problems of students around. Finally, the data of this study is based on the interview with the course owner.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

According to the results of the interview, it was found that there are some highlighted shortcomings of the students related to language skills.

Elementary students are struggling in writing as well as grammar, have limited vocabulary, and need more practice in speaking.

“Karena untuk SD kelemahannya adalah tulisan.”

(“Because for the elementary students, their weakness is writing.”)

“Tapi kalau untuk nulis, itu bertahap. Jadi mereka kalau untuk ujian saya tidak prioritaskan untuk nulis, kalau salah wajar ya, yang penting itu adalah vocabularynya, enrichment tentang vocabulary-nya.”

(“But for writing, it is step-by-step. So, if it is for the exam, I don't prioritize writing, if it is wrong, it is normal, the important thing is the vocabulary, enrichment about the vocabulary.”)

“Kita kalau untuk SD, kita fokus ke vocabulary dulu.”

(“For elementary school, we focus on vocabulary first.”)

“Kalau untuk bicara kita pelan-pelan, step-by-step, bertahap, dari yang simpel-simpel aja, masuk ‘Good morning’ ‘Good afternoon’ ‘How are you today’.”

(“As for speaking, we go slowly, step-by-step, gradually, from simple things, entering ‘Good morning’ ‘Good afternoon’ ‘How are you today’.”)

“Materi di SD itu lumayan berat... sudah diajarkan tenses. Yang mana mereka harus mengerti perubahan kata kerja, Verb 1, Verb 2, Verb 3... dan buat anak sudah berat sekali.”

(“The material in elementary school is quite difficult... tenses have been taught. Where they have to understand verb changes, Verb 1, Verb 2, Verb 3... and for children it is very difficult.”)

While the middle schoolers (SMP and SMA) share quite similar challenges, which is on the conversation and writing aspect. Specifically, junior middle school students

also face challenges related to grammar as it has become more complicated compared to grammar in elementary school.

“Kalau untuk SMP dan SMA, itu hampir sama kendalanya adalah pertama dari sisi percakapan yang kedua adalah tentang teori, ya tentang text, SMA itu ya. ... Kalau SMP masih sebatas tentang tenses yang tidak begitu berat ya.”

(“For junior high school and high school, the problems are almost the same, first in terms of conversation, the second is about theory, yes about text, high school is yes. ... If junior high school is still limited to tenses that are not so heavy.”)

Otherwise, regarding senior high school students, grammar was not mentioned as the problem, while writing once again mentioned as the challenge. However, the challenge of writing for the senior high school students is specifically related to writing texts.

Regarding the challenges faced by the students, the course owner and teachers have made efforts to overcome them. As for speaking problems, students in the course are accustomed to communicate in English at any occasions. The materials taught also cover aspects of speaking, listening, and writing to improve the students' skills. Additionally, learning activity in the classroom is also not only by textbooks, but they also have materials in the form of audio and video to support the learning process.

The efforts attempted to fill the gap of their language learning in the school. The students are assigned to the course by their parents, and their request for their children is that they can have good grades in their school. They choose to assign their kids to the English course for them to have additional learning opportunities and experiences that they do not have in their school. Regarding this, the course owner also mentioned that the lacks they have is caused by limited time of learning in the school. “No way they are able to learn all of speaking, listening, and writing within only one hour,” said the course owner.

CONCLUSION

According to the English course, the students from elementary school, junior high school, and senior high school are struggling with writing, grammar, and speaking. Additionally, the elementary students required enrichment on vocabulary. Moreover, the course owner argues that elementary students should not focus on writing and grammar as well. They need to be accustomed to speaking and enrich their vocabulary. Finally, the English course has made efforts in order to improve the students' skills. Meanwhile, the public schools are suggested to consider their students' lacks and improve the learning process in order to help students enhance their language skills.

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