

FACTORS INFLUENCING AN EFL LEARNER'S PROFICIENCY: AN ENGLISH TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. This study investigated the factors affecting an EFL learner's success in learning English. An experienced English teacher was chosen as a model of a successful learner of English and was interviewed on how she learned English. The findings indicate that the factors contributing to her success in learning English include (1) internal motivation, (2) social context, and (3) a positive attitude towards English. The findings of this study are in line with second language learning theories. This implies that such factors as motivation, social context, and positive attitude towards target language need to be taken into account to succeed in learning English as a foreign language.

Keywords: *EFL proficiency, motivation, social context, positive attitude*

INTRODUCTION

Acquiring English language skills is fairly challenging for many learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). This is particularly true since the amount of exposure to English is highly limited, unlike those who learn English as a second language (ESL). Some English language teaching (ELT) scholars (e.g. Brown, 2007a; 2007b; Mitchell, 2016; Nunan, 1999; 2015) confirms this distinction. In the EFL setting, learners have access to English merely in the classroom with their teacher or with their classmates –no more opportunities for these learners to use English outside of the classroom because the use of mother tongue or learners' native language is more dominant the use of English language. Such countries as Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, Cambodia, Korea, Russia, China, and Egypt fall into this category (see Graddol, 2006; Jenkins, 2003; Kachru, 1992 for details of this category). It is widely acknowledged that being a learner of English in this context hardly achieves a certain level of proficiency.

However, there are various factors that are believed to affect learners' success in language learning – other than being disadvantaged by the context where they are learning. Brown (2007b), for instance, classifies the factors into learner characteristics, linguistic factors, learning processes, age and acquisition, instructional variables, context, and purpose, while Renandya (2013) highlights eight factors – roles of input, output, fluency, formulaic expressions, motivation, grammar, vocabulary, and amount and intensity of instruction – to be more important. Lightbown and Spada (2013) suggest that factors influencing language learning include learner's personal characteristics and experiences, cultural and social environment, native and target language structure, opportunities to interact with target language speakers, and corrective feedback and form-focused instruction accessibility. In addition, Miller (2019) contends that there are nine factors affecting language learning (i.e. motivation, support at home, prior linguistic knowledge, learning environment, teaching

strategies, comprehensible input, student personality, age, and comfort in their country of residence).

Some of the aforementioned researchers share similar ideas on the factors that contribute to success in language learning. They agree that motivation, personal characteristics, social environment, and teaching strategies to be essential factors in learning a second or a foreign language. The present study attempts to explore the factors leading a learner to succeed in learning English as a foreign language. Understanding the factors that influence language learning is crucially important for both language learners and language teachers since it provides consideration of what works and what does not work with learning an additional language.

METHOD

The design of this study is descriptive qualitative, employing interview questions as a research instrument to obtain information on the factors affecting EFL learner's success in learning English. The interview was conducted using social media online chat (both audio and text). An experienced English teacher, Erida Fithri was chosen as a participant in this research. She teaches English at SMAN 9 and Polytechnic of Public Health (POLTEKKES) in Banda Aceh. She also trains English teachers at district and sub-district levels coordinated by the provincial department of education. By looking at her current position and activities, she can be viewed as one of the successful English language learners. The information obtained from the participant was then analyzed and connected to the theories or ideas of scholars in English language learning.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

A. The Result of Interview with Erida Fithri

The result of interview with Erida Fithri about how she learned English is presented in Questions and Answers Format Below.

Hi, Mrs Erida. Can you please describe your activities as an English teacher?

Well, I teach students in grade 3 (year 12) of senior high school. Besides teaching in the classroom, I organize students' English club where students practice their English in both oral and written communication. In addition to teaching activities at school, I also train English teachers regarding teaching methodology, teaching materials, designing syllabus and lesson plans, as well as classroom action research. This activity is coordinated by the provincial department of education. I go to other districts and sub-districts in Banda Aceh to conduct training for novice English teachers.

You look so busy with your current duties. You must have a lot of experience with learning English. Can you share your experience in learning English, please?

I have been learning English for more than ten years. Formally, I have learned English since I was in junior high school (SMP). English was my favorite subject; therefore, I continued my study to higher education which specialized in English. I graduated from the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education of Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh, majoring in English. My interest in English teaching and learning had led me to undertake my master degree, which also majoring in English language teaching and learning, so called TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Informally, I learned English by reading any materials such as storybooks, comics, newspapers, and other reading texts. I also liked to pour out my ideas in writing like writing letters to friends, or writing in a diary. Listening was also an interesting activity to do, since I liked to listen to songs and to watch movies in English. In terms of speaking skills, I liked to practice my English with friends, teachers, and also on my own such as by talking to myself in front of a mirror, then I recorded my voice in order to see how well my speaking and

my pronunciation. As an English teacher, I also participated in many short courses, conferences, seminars, and trainings related to improving my English language proficiency.

Did your family members facilitate you in learning English?

Yes, that was my father who initially introduced me to English when I was a toddler. My father was a secondary school English teacher. He gave me various pictured storybooks and audiotapes equipped with electronic board game. My father read the story in English for me and I loved playing those kinds of games. This helped me a lot in acquiring basic words in English.

That is so helpful. What about your English teachers? How did your English teachers contribute to your success?

My English teachers helped me a lot in my learning. They also inspired me to learn English and made English interesting and important to me and to everyone. They taught me the structure of English sentences and developed my vocabulary acquisition. As commonly practiced by a number of English teachers in Indonesia, the method of teaching that my teachers used were more about to focus on grammatical accuracy such as grammar drills, translation, and fill in the gap (vocabulary). So, this made me confident with my grammatical competence even though there are still some errors somewhere in my speaking and writing.

Did you invest any personal efforts in the language learning process? How did you acquire English language skills?

Yeah sure, while my English teachers' approach to teaching English did not really support me with my speaking ability, the effort I could do to be able to speak English was by watching English movies, listening to English music, recording voice monologue in English,

reading pictured storybooks, and sometimes practicing to speak English in front of a mirror. I knew that learning English in the classroom was not enough to make students obtain a certain level of proficiency. What I usually did was to get access to English as frequently as possible through reading text in English, watching movies in English, and now as an English teacher, I use English as a medium of instruction to my students at school. Additionally, learning English at home was the most influential factor in my English language learning in which it was done informally and in relaxing time without any pressure of being tested. Through this way, I learned English unconsciously which I think will be long-lasting in my memory.

Have you been to foreign countries?

Yes, I once went to Brisbane-Australia for 6 months undertaking an ESL training program which included English for Academic purposes, IELTS, and teaching methods. I also have been to Singapore for a month attending the same program which focused on oral communication. Another country I have visited is the USA, where I attended an ESL training program entitled "Best Practice Implementation to ESL secondary educators" at the University of Hawaii for a month. Moreover, the last foreign country I visited is Australia, the same country as I first visited, in which I enrolled in Master of TESOL at Flinders University in Adelaide.

That is an amazing experience. Now, what do you think the most important factors contributing to the success of English language learning?

I guess internal motivation would be the first important factor. Internal motivation can lead learners to initiate their own learning regardless of limited resources and exposure to the English they have. The second important factor is age. The learners will get more benefits in terms of pronunciation when they start learning English as early as possible (around primary school

student age). The third factor that is important is the social context. The learners can learn English better when they are situated in a supportive learning atmosphere. This is especially when they have the opportunity to travel to an English speaking country where the learners can use the language that is widely spoken in the community.

Do you have any tips for English language learners to be successful in language learning?

First of all, those who want to be successful in learning English they need to have an internal motivation. Second, provide extra hours to learn more and to get access to English outside of the classroom wall. Third, use the language that the students have learned in the class. The more often the students use English, the more fluent the students' English will be.

B. The Analysis of Interview and What Theories in Second Language Learning Say about Contributing Factors to the Success in Learning a Second Language

Erida Fithri is one of the experienced English teachers in Banda Aceh and is seen as one of successful learners of English. She has been teaching English for several years and has conducted a number of trainings for English teachers in some areas in Banda Aceh. With her position as an English teacher and trainer, she had myriad opportunities to undertake training on ELT overseas and pursued her study to Master of TESOL at Flinders University – Adelaide Australia in 2009.

Examining her experience with learning English, the first noticeable factor in her success is internal motivation. In the journey of acquiring English language skills, she manifested some efforts in an unsupported environment. While her English teachers concentrated teaching grammar in her English class, for example, she kept practicing other language skills such as listening to English music, watching English movies, recording voice monologue in English,

reading pictured story books, and most importantly practicing to speak English in front of a mirror in which it contributed a lot to her speaking and presentation skill. Many scholars in English language learning and teaching, for instance Brown (2007a; 2007b), Dörnyei and Csizér (1998), Dörnyei and Chan (2013), Mitchell and Myles (2004), and Yule (2006) agree that motivation in second language learning is one of the most important factors contributing to the rate and success of second language attainment. Motivation, as Ellis (1997) defines, concerns the attitudes and affective states that influence the level of effort that learners make to learn L2. Therefore, motivated students, as Lightbown & Spada (1999) contend, usually refer to those who participate actively in class, show interest in the subject-matter, and study a lot.

It is important to note that in theories of motivation, there are three different views emerge – behavioral, cognitive, and constructivist view. Table 1 shows how motivation is viewed by the three theories.

Table 1. Three Views of Motivation (adapted from Brown, 2007b).

Behaviorist	Cognitive	Constructivist
Anticipation of reward	Driven by basic human needs (exploration, manipulation, etc.)	Social context
Desire to receive positive reinforcement	manipulation, etc.)	Community
External, individual forces in control	Degree of effort expended	Social status
	Internal, individual forces in control	Security of group
		Internal, interactive forces in control

The three views above are in some ways integrated into one's motivation. In the case of Erida Fithri, she invested some time and effort to be fluent in English. On the one hand, being fluent in English can be interpreted as a reward she expected, on the other hand, it can be her social context –either her father who first introduced her to English or her position as an English teacher that makes her need to maintain her proficiency in English. Reading pictured storybooks and listening to English music can also be her need for exploration so as to widen her knowledge.

The second factor influencing her success in learning English is her social context, in which her family and her English teachers played a dominant role in it. Spolsky (1989) puts the social context at the top of his model of second language learning –considering it a significant factor in language learning (see Figure 1). Social context is believed to provide learning opportunities and to lead to attitudes appearing in a learner's motivation. This implies that variation in social context resulted in differences in success or failure. Erida Fithri, in this case, has benefited from having a good and inspired English teacher that stimulated her enthusiastic about learning English as well as her father who facilitated her English language learning by providing language learning games, pictured storybooks, and reading and introducing new vocabularies for her.

It is important to acknowledge that being in English as a foreign language (EFL) context is less benefited from exposure to English, unlike those who live in English as a second language (ESL) setting. It is fortunate for Erida Fithri to be in situation where her environment facilitated her English language learning eventhough she lives in EFL setting. Not many EFL learners has such situation – resulting in the failure to attain proficiency in English language. This is how many people believe that ESL learners are likely to better achieve English language proficiency than EFL learners.

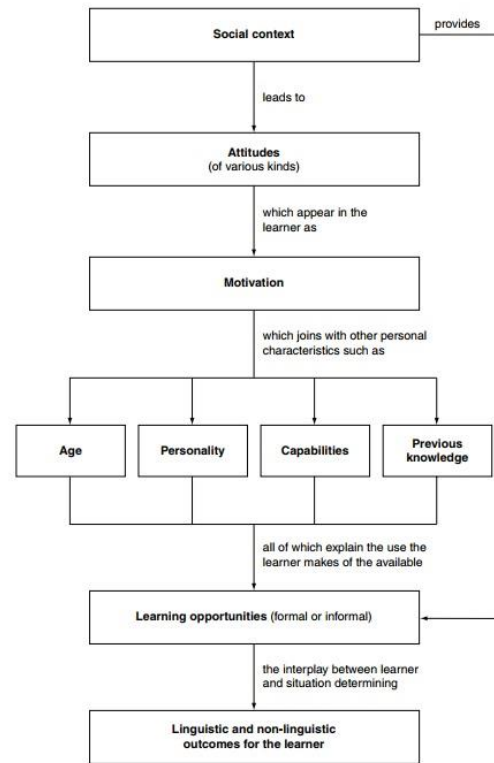


Figure 1. A Model of Second Language Learning (Adapted from Spolsky, 1989)

The last identified factor from Erida Fithri's success is her positive attitude towards English. Her positive attitude can be seen from her willingness to keep practicing to speak English, to read a pictured storybook, to frequently undertake training and to pursue her study in an English speaking country. The learning opportunities which came to Erida Fithri regarding target language and culture were positively responded. Studies (e.g. Brown, 2007b; Ellis, 1997; Elyildirim & Ashton, 2006) show that positive attitudes towards self, the native language group, and the target language group enhanced proficiency.

This analysis proposes that the success of Erida Fithri in English language learning is attributed to three factors – internal motivation, social context, and positive attitude towards English. These three factors determine her way of achieving proficiency in English. This is in line with what she suggested when she was asked

about the most important factor contributing to the success in English language learning where she put internal motivation as the first important one. Although situated in the EFL context, which is generally known to be limited to English exposure, she could successfully make use of other variables or strategies to help her achieve a certain level of proficiency in English

CONCLUSION

This study explored the factors influencing an EFL learner's success in English language learning. Having interviewed an experienced EFL teacher as a model of a successful learner, the study found out that the first factor impacting her success was an internal motivation in which she manifested some efforts to keep practicing her English language skills. The second factor was her social context –being a teacher of English, her father started introducing her the English language relatively early by providing her a pictured storybook, audiotapes equipped with an electronic board game, and telling her a story in English. In addition, her English teacher was fairly helpful and inspiring which made her English much better. The next factor was her positive attitude toward English. Her positive attitude led her to keep practicing English language skills, to undertake a number of language training and to continue her study in an English speaking country. These findings might not be applicable to any EFL learners and any learning contexts. Further study with different variables is immensely required to verify the findings of the present study.

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