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## STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING ENGLISH IN INDONESIA: SOME EFFECTIVE AND INEFFECTIVE WAYS



### Abstract

Although the study of effective strategies for teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in Indonesia has become prominent research topics for decades, little attention is paid to the students' experiences of learning English. This study aims at researching some of our students' experiences of learning English both at their junior and senior high schools. The students reflecting the experience were participants of our course unit of General English, Introduction to linguistics, Structure 2, History of English language, and were both from non-English and English departments at the University of Bengkulu and Dehasen University, Bengkulu, Indonesia. Of the eight effective and fourteen ineffective ways to learn English, we found three main issues apparent in our study namely self-confidence and motivation, learning environment, and methods and media in teaching English as a foreign language. Further explication of each issue is discussed.



*EFL Learning, Freshmen Students' Experiences, Effective Ways, Ineffective Ways*

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## مستخلص

على الرغم من أن دراسة الاستراتيجيات الفعالة لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (TEFL) في إندونيسيا أصبحت موضوعات بحثية بارزة لعقود من الزمن، إلا أنه لم يتم إيلاء اهتمام كبير لخبرات الطلاب في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في بعض تجارب طلابنا في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية في مدارسهم الثانوية والإعدادية. كان الطلاب الذين يعكسون التجربة مشاركين في وحدة دوراتنا في اللغة الإنجليزية العامة، ومقدمة في اللغويات، والهيكل 2، وتاريخ اللغة الإنجليزية، وكانوا من أقسام غير الإنجليزية والإنجليزية في جامعة بنجكولو وجامعة ديهاسين، بنجكولو، إندونيسيا. من بين الطرق الثمانية الفعالة والأربعة عشر غير الفعالة لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية، وجدنا ثلاث قضايا رئيسية واضحة في دراستنا وهي الثقة بالنفس والتحفيز، والبيئة التعليمية، والأساليب ووسائل الإعلام في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. مناقشة المزيد من شرح كل قضية.

نعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تجارب طلاب المبتدئون، طرق فعالة، طرق غير فعالة

## INTRODUCTION

The study of effective strategies for teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in Indonesia had become prominent research topics for decades as it was apparent from varied published research findings (e.g. Lubis & Sulisty, 2018; Miqawati & Sulisty, 2014; Prabawa, 2016; Sholihah, 2015; Warni, 2016). On the one hand, this situation implies that most of the teaching practices that employ appropriate teaching strategies will result in better improvement to the students' achievement. On the other hand, the success of the use of teaching strategies does not provide sufficient information about the student's personal experience of learning English at schools. In addition, there is only little source of information (e.g. Abrar et al., 2018; Alhawsawi, 2014) about the students' experience of learning English in EFL countries in particular Indonesia.

In the context of Indonesia, we the lecturers then believe that the students studying in our universities are equipped with sufficient English skills. Moreover, our belief is supported both by the successful implementation of the newly implemented curriculum, the 2013 Curriculum (K-13), as described in the published research studies (e.g. Noviawati, 2017; Nur & Madkur, 2015; Sundayana, 2015) and the students' success in the national exam particularly in English albeit it shows decreasing English scores

(“Nilai Rata-rata Ujian Nasional Bahasa Inggris Tingkat SMA - Lokadata,” n.d.). In other words, all the students attending classes at the universities must have passed the national exam required by the government of Indonesia, and might be considered as skillful enough in English.

However, the situation aforementioned seems to be paradoxical in the sense that such findings are not in line with what we are dealing with in our English classes. When we were teaching English to our students, either in the English department or in the non-English department, we found that they were in vain to follow the lesson. They even did not know for instance how to pronounce a simple word such as “determine”, how to distinguish between adjectives ended with -ing and -ed such as “interesting” and “interested”, and how to formulate a sentence in a correct form.

Drawing on the outlined situation as a point of departure, the present study aims to deeply explore our students’ experiences of learning English especially during their junior and senior high schools periods. Instead of searching for the best or the most practical strategies for teaching English at schools, we would rather depart from our students’ learning past experiences to arrive at the most effective and ineffective ways that they felt.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study is qualitative in nature. Unlike quantitative research which seeks facts or causes of social phenomena, the qualitative one concerns with understanding human behavior from the researcher’s perspectives (Nunan, 1992). In order to strongly understand our students’ experiences of learning English in the past, we conducted this study in a narrative inquiry (e.g. Creswell, 2012, p. 501) in particular what the so-called narratives of classroom life (Nelson, 2011, p. 466).

In general, the participants of this study were our students from two groups of undergraduate students in the English and non-English departments. The English department group was parallel classes of students taking the course unit of Introduction to linguistics, History of English language and Structure 2. The second group, the non-English department, was composed of parallel classes of students majoring in mechanical engineering, soil science, environmental protection, plant ecology, and journalism taking the course unit of General English.

To collect the data, we the lecturers were involved in the process of teaching and learning activities during a semester (16 meetings) particularly in the first semester of the 2018/2019 academic year. Such a case is aimed to have better understanding of the process of inquiry and interaction in the class. First, we asked our students to reflect their experiences of learning English in their adolescence period by raising a simple question in the class about how their English learning was in the past. Some of our

students directly responded to our questions in a neat explanation while some others left it aside.

Second, we asked the students to express their feelings and/or experiences of learning English in a piece of paper or written form by sending it to our email. We then emphasized that their response, whether it was negative or positive, would not alter our attitude to them. We also lucidly stated that this was only for the sake of research and not for particular circumstances that might harm their reputation. This was important since the students needed to know for what and why their response needed to be recorded and we clearly informed them in this case.

Third, in analyzing the data, we then classified it into effective and ineffective ways to learn English based on the entry in our email. Of the two groups, English and non-English departments, we totally received 171 students' experiences of learning English in the form of short stories. The stories were all written in Bahasa Indonesia to make them effortless to think back to their adolescence period of learning English and easy to express their feeling.



## FINDINGS

In this section, we presented findings of the study. As described earlier that the findings were classified into two categories namely the English department group and the non-English department group. Details of both results were presented in Table 1 and Table 2 in the following.

*Table 1. Effective Ways to Learn English*

No	English Department Students	Non-English Department Students
1	<p><i>...di kelas 8 saya mulai membuang rasa kegugupan saya, dan memberanikan diri berbicara bahasa inggris dengan guru walaupun agak sedikit kurang PeDe...(SI01)</i></p> <p>[...in class eight, I tried to decrease my anxiety and spoke to my English teacher albeit I was not so confident...]</p>	<p><i>...guru saya itu menerapkan sistem membawa kamus disetiap kelasnya, jika tidak membawa kita akan dihukum untuk membuat kamus...(IT21)</i></p> <p>[...my teacher asked us to bring dictionary every time we entered the class. And if we forgot to bring it, we would be punished and asked to create a dictionary...]</p>
2	<p><i>...pada akhir semester kedua ada event kompetisi kecil di sekolah saya, dan disana ada lomba speech. Teman-teman dan wali kelas memberikan saya sedikit motivasi untuk join itu kompetisi. Saya sangat gemetar. Saya juara 3 besar...(SI01)</i></p> <p>[...at the end of the semester,</p>	<p><i>...dalam sisi penjawaban pertanyaan, terkhusus jawaban essay, jawaban kami akan salah jika tidak menggunakan jawaban penuh. Jika soalnya pilihan ganda, kita harus memberi alasan kenapa kita memilih jawaban itu beserta mengartikan apa maksud pertanyaan yang ditanyakan...(IT21)</i></p> <p>[...in order to answer questions, especially</p>

No	English Department Students	Non-English Department Students
	there was an English competition at my school. My friends and English teacher supported me to join such an event. I was so nervous. Finally, I won the game in the third position...]	in the form of essay, our answers/responses would be wrong if we did not provide with full answer. If the questions were in the form of multiple choices, then we must come up with the explanation as to why we choose it...]
3		<p><i>...saat smp guru saya mengajarkan bahasa Inggris dengan lagu supaya mudah diingat juga dengan gambar supaya mudah divisualisasikan dengan cara pengucapannya. Kami belajar sambil bermain game yang berbau bahasa Inggris dan pengucapan bahasa Inggris yang bertujuan agar murid tidak bosan dan tertarik untuk mengikuti pelajaran sampai selesai, serta membiasakan bercakap menggunakan bahasa Inggris di dalam kelas...(IT29)</i></p> <p>[...in junior high school, my teacher taught English through songs so that it was easy to memorize, and also through pictures thereby resulting in easiness in pronunciation. We learned through English game and pronunciation to make the students interested and followed the lesson till the end. Also, the teacher used to speak English in the class...]</p>
4		<p><i>...saya sangat senang belajar Bahasa Inggris karena saya tertarik untuk bisa berbahasa Inggris. Mimpi saya bisa berbahasa Inggris yang fasih dan lancar karena saya juga terjun ke dunia Youtube beberapa tahun lalu, dan sebagian besar Youtubers terkenal Indonesia lancar berbahasa Inggris dan saya ingin meniru jejak mereka...(J04)</i></p> <p>[...I was so happy to learn English because I was interested in it. My dream is to be able and fluent in speaking English because I was involved in the YouTube channel some years ago. Most of YouTubers are fluent in speaking English and I want to follow them...]</p>
5		<p><i>...sewaktu saya SMP saya sangat menyenangi pelajaran bahasa Inggris, karena saya guru yang masuk ke kelas saya itu orangnya humoris, dan cara dia mengajar tidak membuat</i></p>

No	English Department Students	Non-English Department Students
		<i>kita bosan untuk mendengarkannya... (J06)</i> [...when I was in junior high school, I was happy to learn English because the teacher coming to the class was humorous and the way she taught us was interesting and not boring...]
6		<i>...guru saya di SMK itu paling saya suka cara mengajarnya karena beliau mengajar dengan teknik yang serius dan hampir tidak ada bercandanya, dan ia menjelaskan dengan cara setiap kata demi kata dia bertanya "apakah kalian paham akan kata/kalimat yg ibu buat ini" dan dari situlah saya bertanya dan paham ketika kawan bertanya, dan walaupun tidak bertanya semua sudah jelas nantinya... (TM21)</i> [...I liked my teacher at vocational high school the most because he taught us seriously without kidding. He taught us every single word then made sure whether or not we had understood...]

Further, the results of the ineffective ways to learn English during junior high school and senior high school periods were presented in Table 2 in the following.

*Table 2. Ineffective Ways to Learn English*

No	English Department Students	Non-English Department Students
1	<i>...di SMP saya selalu kebingungan saat diperintahkan untuk berbicara dengan bahasa Inggris karena saya belum bisa dengan lancar dan masih terbata-bata... (SI01)</i> [...in junior high school, I was always confused when asked to speak in English because I did not know what to say and how to express it...]	<i>...waktu di SMA saya tambah bingung karena semakin banyak rumus yang harus hafalkan dalam bahasa inggris. Semangat saya dalam belajar bahasa inggris terus menurun dikarenakan banyak faktor yang mempengaruhi saya... (IT01)</i> [...in senior high schools, I was more confused because there was so much English formula. My spirit was decreasing due to many factors...]
2	<i>...di kelas 9 waktu SMP saya sudah sedikit bisa berbicara tanpa terbata-bata walaupun terkadang masih saja terjadi Namun banyak dari teman saya berkata "sok Inggris kau", tapi saya tak perdulikan apa yang mereka katakan kepada saya... (SI01)</i>	<i>...pengalaman saya selama di SMP sangatlah tidak menarik. Beliau sangat jarang masuk kelas saat jam belajar berlangsung, beliau hanya memberikan catatan atau tugas saja lalu pergi meninggalkan kelas... (IT02)</i> [...my experience of learning English at junior high school was not interesting. My teacher was rarely coming to the class. The teacher only asked us to take notes and left

		the class...]
3	<p><i>...masa-masa sekolah menengah atas ini membuat banyak siswa lebih buruk lagi pandangannya terhadap bahasa inggris, para pengajar begitu sibuk mengajarkan aturan grammar kepada para muridnya yang kebanyakan dari mereka bahkan tidak tahu arti dari satu kata didalam bahasa inggris sekalipun...(SI02)</i></p> <p>[...in the period of senior high school, many students viewed English lesson negatively. The teacher was so strict on teaching grammar to the students and most of them did not understand it well...]</p>	<p><i>...dia memberi tugas yaitu mengerjakan semua soal yang ada di LKS plus tau artinya setiap bab diberi waktu satu minggu jikalau tidak mengerjakan tau lah bagaimana ekspresi ibu itu dan yang pasti cubitan maut membiru tercipta padahal tugas itu tidak pernah diperiksa atau pun dibahas...(IT15)</i></p> <p>[...our teacher asked us to do the exercises (LKS) and found the meaning in every chapter of the book. We were given time in a week to find the meaning. If we failed, the teacher would pinch us. The tasks were never been checked or discussed.</p>
4	<p><i>...grammar dianggap satu-satunya hal paling penting yang setiap orang harus mengikutinya sehingga penerapan bahasa Inggris itu sendiri dalam kehidupan sehari-hari dikelas tidak pernah dilakukan...(SI02)</i></p> <p>[...grammar was viewed as the only one important thing so that students needed to follow it. The implementation of speaking English was never be done in the class...]</p>	<p><i>...guru yang selalu jarang masuk, dan selalu memberi tugas yang menumpuk membuatku selalu malas dan sedikit benci melihatnya...(J19)</i></p> <p>[...the teacher was rarely coming to the class and gave tasks. It was overwhelmed thereby resulting in laziness and hatred...]</p>
5	<p><i>...saya rasa setiap pengajar harus lebih mengerti dan memiliki metode yang menarik dalam memberikan pengajaran bahasa Inggris kepada para siswa mereka, ini dimulai dengan memahami sejauh mana kemampuan tiap individu siswanya dalam memahami bahasa Inggris dan sejauh mana minat yang mereka miliki...(SI02)</i></p> <p>[...I think every teacher should understand the students and has an interesting method to teach English. In addition, teachers should also understand his/her students' skills in English...]</p>	<p><i>...saya tidak suka belajar Bahasa Inggris di SMP karena kami selalu di berikan text dan harus diartikan dan kami tidak pernah disuruh berbicara satu sama lain menggunakan bahasa Inggris...(TM23)</i></p> <p>[...I did not like my English teacher at junior high school because she only gave us English text and translated it. She never asked us to speak in English...]</p>
6	<p><i>...guru menerangkan berdasarkan</i></p>	<p><i>...kelas 10 guru kami ngajarnya suara kecil, agak</i></p>

*buku pegangan yang isinya hanya teks, dan gurunya hanya menyuruh murid membaca, paragraf demi paragraf secara bergantian dan terkadang yang di jelaskan tidak masuk uts atau uas...(BI03)*  
[...the teacher explained the lesson on the basis of textbook which consisted of texts. The teacher only asked us to read interchangeably and sometimes what s/he asked was not examined in the mid-term...]

*gak jelas dan kami kurang ngerti dan hebatnya dia ini bukan ngajar bahasa Inggris aja tapi seni budaya juga dia yang ngajar. Kami aja bingung basic ngajarnya yang mana, kami sama-sama gak ngerti...(TM24)*

[...at class 10, our teacher taught us with low voice, not clear thereby making us confused. She not only taught us English but also art sciences. We did not know her specificity...]

7 *...mam ini setiap masuk kelas hanya mengomel dan mengoceh. Setiap masuk hanya menyuruh siswanya membaca teks bergantian, sedangkan beliau hanya bermain ponsel...(BI09)*  
[...the teacher only yelled at the students. Every time she entered the class, we were asked to read the text interchangeably but she only played her mobile phone...]

*...di kelas 1 SMP saya memiliki guru bahasa Inggris sangatlah emosian dalam belajar setiap kali dia masuk saya pribadi slalu mendapat perlakuan yang keras seperti di bentak, dilempar pake penghapus, ditendang, disuruh push up begitulah tiap harinya samapi 2 tahun...(TM38)*  
[...in junior high school, my English teacher was so bad-tempered. Every time he entered the class, he got mad at me all the time. He also threw an eraser, yelled at me, kicked me, and asked me to push-up. It happened to me in two years...]

## DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this study was to research our students' experiences of learning English in their junior and senior high schools periods. Our students were participants of the course unit of General English, Introduction to linguistics, History of English language, and Structure 2, and were both from the non-English and the English departments at the University of Bengkulu and Dehasen University, Bengkulu, Indonesia. The guided question in our study included: how was your experience of learning English at junior and senior high schools periods? Was it meaningful? If yes/no, why?

Relevant to the guided research questions, we received 171 students' experiences of effective and ineffective ways to learn English in the form of short stories based on the entry in our email. However, not all the stories were legible even it was written in Bahasa Indonesia. Some of the stories were similar in sentences, repeated the sequence of events, and were indicated plagiarized. Therefore, we scrutinized all the short stories and then found eight students' effective experiences and fourteen students'



ineffective experiences of learning English both in the junior high school and senior high school periods.

On the individuals' experiences of effective ways to learn English, we found that both groups expressed similar feelings in terms of self-confidence and/or motivation. The students' self-confidence and motivation would increase if there were events that triggered them to compete for English such as English games and English contests. In actual fact, however, rarely do we find such competitions happened to increase our students' self-confidence and motivation in Bengkulu, Indonesia, the place where this study took place. This also was consistent with Bandura (1977) in his theory of self-efficacy which implied that if one won a competition for instance, such a successful experience would support his/her efficacy in the next competition(s) in life. This piece of evidence was also similar to Abrar et al. (2018) who revealed that their students were anxious and even reluctant to speak English (p.137). Probably, the analysis as to why Abrar et al.'s (2018) students were nervous when speaking English was revealed in our findings. We found that our students' adolescence period was lack of exposure to English competitions, contests and/or any events that might trigger their motivation not only to learn but also to use English inside and outside the classroom. This is what the English teacher needs to consider in his/her teaching-learning processes.

Of all the effective and ineffective experiences, we were surprised at the way our students expressed their feelings particularly in the ineffective ways to learn English. We were surprised because to some extent, what they had experienced was similar to ours in the past. The issue of learning environment, in particular teacher's behavior, appeared seven times (e.g. SI01, IT01, IT02, IT15, J19, TM38 and BI09). Of the seven experiences, three of them expressed the teachers' rarity in attending the class (e.g. IT02, IT15, J19). All of them told similar voice; the rarity of teacher's attendance and the request for taking notes and doing the tasks. The students loathe such attitudes towards them and we do agree with Anugerahwati & Saukah (2010) that exemplary teachers are those who have excellent personal competence (p. 54).

We were quite shocked to know that our students had experienced bad cultural milieu in the past. One of our students (e.g. TM38) expressed worse experience than other friends. He was taught by a bad-tempered English teacher by expressing the words "...in junior high school, my English teacher was so bad-tempered. Every time he entered the class, he got mad at me all the time. He also threw an eraser, yelled at me, kicked me, and asked me to push-up. It happened to me in two years..." To further understand the rationale for such a case, we interviewed the student. We asked him why the English teacher was doing so. He replied "I did not know sir, what I know was my English teacher had so many problems in his life". One main point from our

interview was that this student had passed English national exam and achieved the best score. He even did not aware of the way he made it.

Despite the fact that such short stories have degree of reliability as they come from a number of students, in this regard, we do agree with Basthomi (2007) stating that students' comments were not similar to experts' judgment (p. 136). As a result, we could not totally agree with what our students experienced without understanding the context. Understanding the context means that we clearly comprehend the context of the teacher's fury, and this is not described in the stories. All the seven short stories only highlighted their teacher's violent temper in the class.

Another important concern that emerged was the issue of the use of interactive media and methods in teaching English (e.g. IT29, J04, TM21). This turned out that teaching English through songs and YouTube were most effective thereby resulting meaningful insights into the students' mind. In addition, the teachers who are able to deal with technology in teaching English are much loved than those who are not. In relation to media (e.g. YouTube), our student would be more interested in English if s/he participated in and/or contributed to the media. Unlike the past, the practice of teaching and learning English today should involve technology so that they arrive at, at least what the so-called computer-literate. In a nutshell, students' involvement in the media such as YouTube will increase their confidence in learning English, and the English teacher needs to pay attention to this.



## CONCLUSION

Effective and ineffective experiences of learning English at schools are crucial as revealed in this study, and thus some conclusions are drawn. First, our students would be more efficacious or highly motivated to learn English if they were involved in many English competitions or contests. Such experiences would trigger their motivation to boost their English skills. English teachers need to pay attention to this particular situation in order to hone the quality of their teaching and learning practices.

Second, what works and what does not work in the practice of daily teaching-learning activities are important for both the teacher and the students in order to uphold the quality. From the individuals' narratives, we revealed that most of our students had experienced ineffective ways or inconvenient situations to learn English thereby making them worried. Such a case should not be happened to our students since bad experiences would result in negative attitude to both the teacher and the subject.

Last but far from least, the English teachers also need to vary both the media and methods in their teaching practices. They also might conduct the process of

teaching and learning activities outside the classroom for instance by asking the students to sell a product using English. In addition, the teacher also might combine the mode of learning for instance by delivering English materials using technology devices such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc.



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