Lessons from a Good Language Learner: A Case Study

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Abstract. This research aims to explore the perspective of a successful English as a foreign language (EFL) learner regarding his own linguistic development and the contributing factors of the success. The learner was deemed to be a good EFL learner because he was an extremely struggling learner in terms of the English language once, but he became an EFL teacher in an elementary school. The study utilized experiences of an Indonesian who was a good EFL learner collected through in-depth interviews. The data revealed that although the learner considered his listening skills improved significantly, his level of confidence in the other language skills did not increase as high. With regard to the contributing factors that influence the language learning process, his success was attributed to the teachers and self-awareness. Teachers’ personality became the major motivating factor to develop English proficiency. In addition, teachers who gave assignments and provided negative feedback were considered to contribute significantly to the linguistic development. The implications for teacher education are also discussed.

Keywords: good language learners, linguistic development, EFL, teachers’ personality, teacher education.

Introduction

What makes a good language learner has been widely discussed in the foreign language teaching and learning area since mid-70s. A vast array of investigations has been conducted to explore contributing factors that make some language learners learn better than others. Good language learners have been researched from the perspectives of the learning strategies (Griffiths 2015; Nazri, Yunus, Nazri, 2015; Heredia, Luchini,
2015; Wahyudi, 2014; Gerami, Baighlou, 2011; Takeuchi, 2003), culture (Norton, Toohey, 2001), beliefs (Boakye, 2007), and motivation (Ushioda, 2008). Many studies, such as the one by Gerami and Baighlou (2011), explore good language learners’ use of strategies, e.g. Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). SILL basically suggests that good language learners are engaged in certain thinking activities when learning a language.

While it is important to explore strategies employed by a good language learner, other factors, e.g. environment, have surprisingly received very little attention. Meanwhile, Vygotsky (1978) theorizes that individuals learn language and behavior from their environment, such as peers. Therefore, apart from learning strategies, other variables might also contribute to their learning. Factors like teachers, tasks, motivation, and beliefs can play significant roles that determine whether or not a student can be a good language learner. Understanding these other factors influencing good language learners may lead to success of language learning. In addition, acknowledging the contributing factors of good language learners can minimize the gap between the good and the poorer learners (Nazri et al., 2015).

The objectives of this paper are twofold. The first is to explore how a successful language learner views his own linguistic development, and the second is to find out the major contributing factors of his linguistic development in the eyes of the learner. The highlight of the study is that the participant of this research used to be a struggling English learner but became an EFL teacher, who was selected through years of observation both outside and inside the class. By understanding the learner's voice on how he viewed his own linguistic growth, teacher education institutions or teachers could employ similar strategies to help other learners. In addition to this, recognizing external factors that motivate learners is essential in creating a safe environment to provide meaningful learning. Finally, research on good language learners in Indonesian contexts is quite scarce. This study can fill in the gap that exists within the body of knowledge.

**Literature Review**

Good language learners are influenced by several factors. To name a few – strategies, motivation, and environment are considered to be determining factors of whether or not an individual can be a good language learner. This section describes possible external and internal factors that make good language learners. However, notes need to be taken that one factor may be stronger than another for one learner.
Strategies of Good Language Learners

Many scholars have considered learning strategies as a key factor that differentiates between good language learners and poorer ones (Griffiths, 2015). Nazri et al. (2015), for instance, investigate the strategies used by EFL students. The investigation reveals that good language learners use metacognitive strategies more often than any other language learning strategies. Using SILL, Nazri et al. (2015) identify that good language learners employ affective strategies less frequently than other strategies. Affective strategies are related to a learner’s attitude, mood, or anxiety when learning a language. For example, when a learner possesses a high level of anxiety, he/she will less likely be a good language learner. Thus, a good language learner would perform strategies to reduce the level of nervousness, such as listening to music to make them more relaxed and learn better. Similarly, Heredia and Luchini (2015), Gerami and Baiglou (2011), and Takeuchi (2003) find that good language learners use a wider variety of strategies than poorer ones.

The findings of Nazri et al. (2015) study, however, are contradictory to that of Sykes (2015). In his study, Sykes (2015) concludes that a good language learner needs to have a positive attitude towards their own learning. Taking personal responsibility for their own learning is considered to have a high influence on the success of learning. This attitude would lead to learners’ engagement with meaningful language learning activities that can boost their linguistic proficiency. The strategy that might come out of this attitude is self-regulated learning, which, according to Seker (2016), is rarely used. Seker’s (2016) study shows that although self-regulated learning was used only at low to moderate level, a language learner would still benefit from using the strategies. Sykes’s (2015) and Seker's (2016) studies are different from Nazri et al. (2015) in a way that the former seemed to indicate that affective strategies are more important than other strategies making good language learners.

Motivation of Good Language Learners

Motivation is one of the determining factors to a lot of activities. Dornyei, Henry, and Muir (2016) state that the construct of motivation is used to describe the reasons that make people think and behave. This means that if they had motivation, language learners would perform several actions to achieve their goals. Basically, motivation is divided into two: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Ushioda (2008) suggests that learners who are intrinsically motivated would engage in more diverse learning activities than those who are extrinsically motivated. On the other hand, Ushioda (2008) maintains that whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic, motivation can have significant impact on language learning. Wahyudi (2014), for instance, studies a good language learner who is highly extrinsically motivated, in which he wishes he could get a better career in the future.
What might have been missing in the research of motivation and foreign language acquisition is the relationship between time and motivation, as indicated by Dornyei et al. (2016) and Kurk (2016). It is not uncommon that language learners experience dynamic changes of motivation. Factors that can be regarded as motivating at one point of a learning period might turn into demotivating factors for a variety of reasons. As Kurk’s (2016) longitudinal study shows, motivation fluctuates during a single lesson and dynamically changes from one language lesson to another. The research also shows that the causes of the fluctuation are lessons, learners, and school. The lesson includes tasks, class activities, and course books. With regard to learners, students’ age, problem solving skills, and physical condition become the factors that cause changes in motivation. Meanwhile, school can be the reason of motivation changes because of the scheduling problem. Indeed, so far motivating and demotivating factors have been viewed as separate entities. This is in line with Sykes's ideas (2015), who states that “many researchers view motivation as a static, unchanging phenomenon” (p. 714), which in fact is not (Kurk, 2016). It goes without saying that maintaining learners’ motivation through the learning process is essential.

Social Environment

Social environment, such as friends, teachers, parents, teaching style, and curriculum, has become a focus in the area of language learning. Norton and Toohey (2001) assert that social environment, including the workplace, can encourage a language learner to be an effective one by providing a space for communication so that they consistently and consciously monitor their linguistic development. The social environment would in turn help the language learner to gain access to a wider community that can form their identity. Norton and Toohey’s (2001) study, which involved immigrants having arrived in an English speaking country, explores how the participants struggled to communicate in English and made several attempts before they succeeded to improve their opportunities to participate in the society. Not only did their English language skills develop, they became individuals who were respected in their community.

In education contexts, social environment refers to teachers, teaching instruction, learning atmosphere, the lesson itself – just to name a few. With regard to teachers, a plethora of research probe into what kind of teachers can encourage learners to be good language learners. The research shows that teachers who have a pleasant personality, e.g. humorous, encouraging and kind, are considered to be effective and able to inspire students to be good language learners (Celik, Arikan, Caner, 2012; Chen, 2011; Barnes, Lock, 2010; Chen, Lin, 2009).

For example, Celik et al. (2012) study in Turkey shows that good language teachers are those who can establish a positive student-teacher interaction. In addition, their study
also finds that such teachers should have sound knowledge of the English language, teaching methodology, and personality traits. Similar findings are also obtained by Chen (2011), who has conducted a study in Thailand. The research shows that teachers who create a safe environment to learn are preferred by students, since students feel less anxious, which in turn causes their more active participation in the teaching / learning process. In Korean contexts, Barnes and Lock (2010) find that teachers who possess such personality traits as friendliness, caring, and patience are attributed as good language teachers. In addition, teachers who provide error correction are deemed to be the ones who are helpful to students in developing their linguistic competence. Lastly, Chen and Lin (2009) investigate students from Tainan area about their perception of good teachers that can help them be good language learners. Unlike some studies, Chen and Lin’s (2009) research shows that teachers’ way of teaching is not considered to be one characteristics that helps students to learn English. One of the interesting findings of the research is that female and male students indicate different preferences of good language teachers’ characteristics.

In the area of teaching instruction, Rubin and McCoy (2008) clarify that tasks and good language learners are closely related because good language learners are able to manage their learning with the help of others, i.e. teachers. One of the highlights of Rubin and McCoy’s (2008) study is that although good language learners are already experts in their learning, they still need proper instruction and scaffolding activities to help them to be better learners. In addition to teachers and teaching instructions, learning atmosphere also influences the success of language learning. Kissau and Salas (2013), for instance, interview and observe a group of male students to explore what kind of social environment can accommodate students to learn a language. The study reveals that while teaching strategies are important to encourage students to be good language learners, a save and respectful educational atmosphere is also needed.

The Study

The study was conducted in an English language education department at a private university in Indonesia. While English is not used in daily communication in the country, it is introduced starting from middle school with minimum meeting hours at school. However, English is the major language of instruction in the department. It goes without saying that the levels of English proficiency of students admitted in the department vary widely, including those who go to English departments. In Indonesia, it is common knowledge that graduates of the English language education department learn and are trained to be English as foreign language school teachers.
The Participant

The participant was Royan (pseudonymed), an Indonesian male student, who at the time of the interviews was 21 years old. Like many other Indonesian students, Royan received English lessons since he was in middle school. He chose the English language department as he was not accepted in the major he wanted. The researcher used to be one of his teachers in several mandatory courses for six semesters. In the first semester, Royan was struggling so much that the researcher genuinely thought he should quit the English language department and enroll in other departments that used less English language in the following year. He did much better in the courses that the researcher taught in the fifth and sixth semesters. Shortly after the data collection, the researcher was informed that Royan was teaching English in one of recognized elementary schools. Royan's story was unique in its own way. Once a struggling EFL learner, Royan became someone who helped others to learn the language he was learning. Due to the underlying reasons, the researcher strongly believed that Royan was a good language learner.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data used in this study were mainly collected from interviews. At the time of the interviews, the researcher brought the journals that Royan wrote in the first semester to help him recall information about his journey of learning a language. Royan's journals served as the physical artifact (Yin, 2009, 113). In addition, Yin (2009) asserts that archival record, such as students' files and records, can be used to gain richer data from the participants. These documents can be used to avoid bias obtained from the interview data. Yin (2009) also suggests that data sources in a case study can also be collected from individual behavior, attitudes, and opinions. The interviews with Royan were conducted twice, with each interview taking around one hour to conduct. Inform consent was obtained verbally when the researcher requested Royan to be the participant. Because both of us spoke several languages in our daily life, these languages were naturally applied in our interaction during the interviews. The excerpts used in this paper were translated into standard English. Notes were taken, and the data were analyzed for emerging themes. The researcher then provided the results for Royan to consider if he wanted to change any information. No information was changed.
Results and Discussion

Royan’s responses to the interview questions can be classified into two general categories: how Royan viewed his linguistic development and major contributing factors of his linguistic development.

Royan’s Perspectives of his Linguistic Development

Language skills. At the beginning of his program, what Royan understood about learning a language was by translating from his native language to English. Currently, he viewed that he could make sense that his native language, the Indonesian language, was in some way different from English. He claimed that he had a better linguistic knowledge in that he did not do direct translation anymore. While this may be common among language learners, according to Cook and Singleton (2014), language learners would think slightly more differently than those who are monolinguals. One of the characteristics of good language learners is to have “better feel of language” (Cook, Singleton, 2014, 7).

Royan possessed a better feel of language because he had his linguistic knowledge improved. This was also indicated in his journals that I brought during one of the interviews. His writing showed that, in general, Royan could explain his thinking more elaborately and that he had better control of many aspects of writing, e.g. punctuation, coherence, and cohesiveness. Linguistic knowledge like sentence structure was a concern of his in the first year, but he gradually improved, although like almost all language learners, his grammar was not perfect. In the area of language learning, some people agree that grammar is unimportant in conversation as long as the message is conveyed. However, Cook and Singleton (2014) state otherwise. They maintain that without grammar, effective communication cannot take place.

Of all language skills, Royan claimed that his listening skills accelerated quite quickly compared to the other language skills. Although he was not sure what made his listening skills improve, Royan explained further that he could effortlessly understand what the speaker said. He said that “there are three sections in the TOEFL test. To me, the listening section is the easiest” (interview excerpt). He then described a course that required the students to do a paper-based TOEFL test. From the three sections of the test, he earned the highest score in the listening comprehension section. While it is not always the case that it is easier for language learners to understand verbal language (listening) earlier than graphic skills (reading), listening skills is the first skill that is developed when learning the first language (White, 2008). This particular skill was developed by listening utterances from other people both native or non-native English speakers. In the case of Royan, he appreciated that most of his teachers used both
English and his native languages during his first years, because the teaching strategy evidently helped him to develop his listening skills. However, White (2008) highlights that listening alone is not sufficient to ensure language learning to occur. Good language learners need to be engaged in a wider social context to interact and learn how meaning is negotiated. Language learners in general need to use their knowledge of the target language so they can make sense of the information they receive. Apart from this, White (2008) asserts that other factors like motivation and attentiveness play important roles in the development of listening skills.

Apparently, Royan understood that it was important for him to understand his weakness, which motivated him to become more attentive when listening to new utterances and expressions from other people. On the other hand, it is worth noting that Royan’s listening skills could have been well developed due to the classroom culture. In general, teaching English in the Indonesian contexts has heavily been conducted in the culture, which considers good students as those who obey and follow teachers (Masduqi, 2014). Thus, Royan, influenced by this culture, might have developed his listening skills from the culture he was in. This is in line with Finkbeiner (2008), who states that culture can influence whether a language learner will be good or poor due to the degree of inhibition and attitude.

**Self-confidence.** Although Royan was considered as a good language learner by the researcher, who acted as his teacher, and made an incredible achievement, Royan believed that his linguistic competence did not improve as much as he had expected:

> It is not about the teacher. But I don’t know. Is it me who is slow or is it me who is not diligent enough to study? I understand that my motivation increases from time to time, but my English is still not that good. I mean if I have to speak with an English native speaker, I would still be very anxious. If you want me to write an elaborate literature review, for example, I still cannot do it (Interview excerpt).

Seemingly, Royan did not see himself as a good language learner. His reflection showed that his linguistic development did not affect his self-confidence. Based on the researcher’s observation, Royan’s confidence in using English improved significantly. In addition to this, his engagement in the courses that the researcher taught also increased steadily overtime. The courses taught by the researcher ranged from skill-based courses, such as reading courses in the first year, to pedagogy-based courses, like Curriculum Development in the latter year. Every meeting, the researcher would ask the class a few questions with regard to reading and ask them to write down their answer in English. The researcher gave the students around 20–30 minutes to write the answer to the questions as elaborately as they could. Since they were still freshmen, the questions would require the students to retell the story of what they had read. In
the first semester, Royan seemed to find difficulties to understand the pages assigned
to read because he could write only a few sentences.

However, Royan became more and more active to participate in various class
activities over the years, e.g. reading before the class and speaking in a group and class
discussion, although the type of readings was more challenging to him and a lot of
other students. The researcher frequently observed him speaking in his native language
during the discussion, but the topics he raised were based on the readings assigned.
Interestingly, although he acknowledged that language proficiency was improved, he
still felt anxious and less confident to perform language-related tasks. Royan’s situation
indicates that linguistic proficiency and self-confidence have an intricate relationship
that can influence learners to actively use the language (Edwards, Roger, 2015). The
researcher’s teaching experience also shows that many language learners who possess
a high level of English proficiency feel reluctant to participate in discussion because
they want to avoid making mistakes and lose their face.

Factors Contributing to Royan’s Linguistic Development

Teachers. Royan attributed his teachers to one of the key determining factors that
made him a good language learner. Regardless of their ways of teaching and learning
atmosphere that they created, Royan stated he could still learn some lessons from them,
both linguistically and pedagogically. On the other hand, Royan also recognized that
some teachers played a better role in developing his linguistic competence than others.
The first criterion set for teachers who could encourage him into being a good language
learner was lowering his anxiety when learning. These teachers, in his opinion, were
usually humorous teachers. However, he also emphasized that humorous teachers still
needed to be able to relate their humor with the lesson, “humorous teachers who can
help me develop are those who can use humor to teach. Not merely just being funny
in class” (interview excerpt).

The teachers’ personality was viewed as a major contributing factor because they
were able to influence his attitude toward the course in general. He said, “Different
teachers can give the same type of tasks, but the tasks given by this particular type
of teachers have bigger impacts on my linguistic development” (interview excerpt).
In addition, he refused to believe that good English teachers were funny and easy to
students, e.g. giving minimum number of tasks, as he believed that tasks were actually
a means to an end, which was to build his linguistic competence. He further explained
that his linguistic competence developed because of the feedback he received from the
teacher. He recalled his experience in which the teacher just returned his work without
any feedback, although he realized that he made a lot of mistakes both grammatical
and conceptual. This type of a teacher was deemed to be unhelpful. Teachers’ aspects
have been vastly researched from diverse perspectives in different contexts. Teachers’ personal and pedagogical knowledge is favored by students in universities in Thailand (Chen, 2011), Japan (Lee, 2010), and Korea (Barnes, Lock, 2013), as well as middle school students in China (Chen, Lin, 2009).

In addition, Royan appreciated teachers who gave him feedback. Ellis (2013) acknowledges two types of feedback: positive and negative. The former refers to providing encouragement to students through positive comments like praising, and the latter is often called corrective feedback (Ellis, 2013). Interestingly, Royan preferred corrective feedback to positive one. When asked further, Royan’s statement affirmed:

I have a teacher who only wrote good on my paper. I knew that I had done something terribly wrong with the assignment, but he did not give me any suggestions or feedback. I do not think that helped my English improve. To me, it seemed that he did not read my work. On the contrary, when he wrote something on my paper, it means that he read it and he saw something was wrong and he wanted me to fix it. That kind of learning actually helped me. In short, the teacher wants me to improve, and he knows which part he wants me to work on (interview excerpt).

Although Royan considered corrective feedback to be more helpful than the positive one, other students might find negative feedback to be discouraging. Ellis asserts that corrective feedback can have a negative impact on “learners’ receptivity to learning” (2013, 3); thus, corrective feedback should be given in a friendly and supportive way. Seemingly, Royan could deal with the negative feedback better than with the positive feedback. Royan’s preference for corrective feedback is in line with Barnes and Lock’s (2013) study that shows similar findings in Korean contexts.

**Self-awareness – instrumental motivation.** When asked about the contributing factors of his linguistic development, Royan immediately answered that it was his self-awareness that appeared at one point of his learning journey. He remarked, “I think I came to a point where I became aware that I will not be a college student forever. I will have to use my English in one way or another, either for work or something else” (interview excerpt). In addition, Royan’s self-awareness came out due to his experience when he was assigned to teach English to a group of school students. He found out that his students’ level of English proficiency was slightly higher than his. Although he did not find many problems when he was teaching the class, he felt extremely embarrassed when he had to reflect on his teaching experience. He remarked, “I could divert the students’ questions and I thought I was alright. But now, when I have to think of it, I feel extremely embarrassed. I learned my lesson both personally and professionally” (interview excerpt).
Our discussion then continued on the topic of his future plan. He explained that he planned to be an English teacher in elementary school, which was quite surprising. When asked why he would choose to teach elementary school students, he remarked:

I think I can still manage, in terms of subject knowledge. My English is still not that good. I am not that confident yet to teach the higher level students. Not at this point. Middle and high school students need a higher level of English proficiency. I am not there yet, but I am trying (interview excerpt).

Royan’s self-awareness is related to the practical consideration of the use of the language he was learning, which is finding a job, graduating from college, or teaching a group of students. The self-awareness turned into his motivation to do well or to improve his linguistic competence. Liu (2015) also finds that motivation contributes to the learning autonomy and responsibility. According to Cook and Singleton (2014), this type of motivation falls into the category of instrumental motivation. Royan’s self-awareness can also be viewed as the ability to reflect on his practice. This particular ability is deemed important to better prepare future teachers. As Farrell (2016) suggests, reflective ability should be given to future teachers as soon as possible so that they can respond to diverse challenges that they will face when teaching. This can be done by improving future teachers’ self-awareness of their own practice.

However, this particular finding might also be influenced by Royan’s cultural background. One of the cultural values embraced by the majority of Indonesian society is to feel uncomfortable to talk highly about themselves (pekewuh) (Masduqi, 2014) because people would see this as showing off. As a matter of fact, Royan could have done much better when he was teaching classes, but he did not want to show it to other people, especially to me – his teacher. While the feeling is completely understandable, Royan’s self-awareness has evidently contributed to his linguistic development.

**Conclusion and Implications**

How a good language learner looks at his own linguistic development is an interesting topic to discuss. What other people consider a success in learning a language may be seen the otherwise to other people. To this extent, although the researcher viewed Royan as a good language learner, it was not the case with what Royan thought about himself. His level of confidence with one area of language skills did not work simultaneously with the enhanced language skills. This implies that teacher education might need to find strategies to boost self-confidence. Further research needs to be conducted to explore to what extent self-confidence manifests in students’ attitudes and influences.
language learning of a good language learner. One of the challenges of teaching English in the Indonesian contexts is that teachers need to introduce a different culture to the students. EFL teaching methodology has been developed quite fast and often requires students to actively participate in the teaching/learning process. Thus, teaching EFL in the culture that requires students to do otherwise can be quite stressful if the teachers cannot find teaching strategies to do this. On a separate note, EFL teachers should also be open-minded with the new culture for the success of learning.

Motivation and social environment also influence the success of language learning. Maintaining students’ motivation is not an easy thing to do and this is not only teachers’ responsibility. Students also need to take some actions to retain the motivation to share the learning responsibility. The social environment, such as teachers and their tasks and feedback, obviously has a big contribution to encourage students to be good language learners. To this extent, Royan identified that self-awareness or instrumental motivation and teachers were the key factors that led his success to language learning. These findings imply that language teacher education institutions need to carry out some effort to monitor learners’ motivation and create an encouraging learning environment.

While many studies show that learning strategies become one of the major contributing factors to the success of language learning, the participant of this particular study did not mention his learning strategies as one of the influencing factors in either interview. On the other hand, learning strategies have long been considered as the main characteristic to differentiate whether a language learner is good or poor. Thus, strategies undertaken by language learners still need to be paid attention to and taught to learners. It implies that teachers should frequently give their students examples of how to employ the strategies through tasks. This is in line with Griffiths’ study, who asserts that “teachers should encourage learners to expand their strategy repertoires and to make frequent use of the strategies that they have at their disposal in order to maximize their chances of success” (2015, 428). Further research needs to be conducted to investigate which strategies can be taught and the effectivity of the strategies to encourage students to be good language learners.

**Limitation of the Study**

The limitation of the current research is the number of participants involved. The data obtained from one participant, no matter unique the participant might not be, can be hard to generalize the findings. A bigger number of participants might yield different data. In addition, the limitation of this study is that the data fail to mention how Royan orchestrated his language learning so that his language steadily developed. This study also had minimally explored whether or not Royan’s motivation fluctuated at any time of his study or what had caused the changing of his motivation.
References


Sékmingos užsienio kalbos pamokos: atvejo analizė

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Santrauka


Esminiai žodžiai: gerai kalbos besimokantis mokinys, kalbos ugdomasis, anglų kaip užsienio kalba, mokotojo asmenybė, mokotojų ugdomas.

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