

# UNCOVERING COMPLEXITIES OF EFL STUDENT'S IDENTITY IN TERMS OF SOCIOCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The challenges faced by EFL students in expanding circle countries in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) have been studied a lot. Although much of the previous research has revealed many events in it in general, little previous research has examined this problem specifically by raising the story of an EFL student's academic journey from the process to the sociocultural influences. By using autobiography narrative inquiry that uses reflections related to the experiences while learning English in an expanding circle (e.g., Indonesia) as the main data, the purpose of this current study is to explore the challenges faced in relation to the sociocultural environment and reveals how the strategies used to deal with these challenges in the process of building one's identity as an EFL student. The findings in this study can make a practical contribution to becoming a benchmark and motivation to act for non-native English teachers (NNESTs) (in particular) and prospective teachers. And it can also be a reference for teachers and researchers about how policies and teaching strategies are appropriate for this problem.

Keywords: *EFL, Student's identity, Autobiographical narrative inquiry, Sociocultural influences.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the establishment of English as an international language (EIL), many countries in the world have begun to establish English as a second language (ESL) (e.g., Malaysia, Singapore, India, Pakistan, etc.) and as a foreign language (EFL) (e.g., Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, etc.) for international communications. This is stated in Kachru's concentric circle of English, Kachru (1992) states that the use of English in the world is divided into three circles (e.g., inner circle, outer circle, and expanding circle). Even though it is divided into three circles, more than 80% of the intensity of the use of English as an international communication tool occurs among non-native English speakers (NNES) (Lee et al., 2019). This is proven, one of which is the use of social media (e.g., Facebook) which is 85% held by NNES users (Aslam, 2022).

Even though the development of EIL towards the NNES is at the highest level and can be proven by the data above, in reality, the expanding circle countries experience quite complex challenges concerning the development of English as a foreign language. Within the scope of expanding circle countries (e.g., Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, etc.) several complex problems arise related to the perception of English as a foreign language, one of which is the lack of enthusiasm to learn English (Liu, 2022; Zacharias, 2012). This is shown through the views of the NNES regarding the use of English as being perceived as not loving their own language (not nationalism), lack of use of English in everyday life, no opportunity to use English, rarely interacting with native

speakers, afraid of making mistakes because of embarrassment and has its own language (Alkhannani, 2021; Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Pramono, 2009).

Therefore, the process of being an EFL student in an expanding circle of countries not only involves their learning and knowledge but also mediates their identity, constructions, and reconstructions (Anjanillah & Wahyudi, 2021; Norton, 2010). Identity is formed through various factors such as personal history, culture, and social environment (Holland et al., 1998; Widodo, et al., 2020). As an EFL student in an expanding circle country (e.g., Indonesia) which is full of diversity of languages and cultures and always upholds a unified language (Indonesian), of course, we face many challenges in learning English as a foreign language. To find this identity construction, we conducted an autobiographical narrative inquiry through my academic journey as an EFL student, such as the experience during the journey of learning English and the complex challenges that I faced from cultural and social factors.

Although there is much research on inquiry in learning English in expanding circle countries and the challenges it faces, there is little research that examines the challenges faced by EFL students through their academic journey and seen from their sociocultural environment. Methodologically, there has been no previous research that adopted autobiographical narrative inquiry studies in reflecting on the academic journey directly from an insider's perspective (Barkhuizen, et al., 2013) regarding this research. Therefore, this research needs to be done because to assess someone's identity validly, it is necessary to have valid information or data sources from the first person. To fill this aforementioned gap, the present study seeks to explore the challenges I faced as an EFL student from the cultural and social factors, and to explore how I deal with these challenges during the process of building my identity as an EFL student with research questions as following:

1. What challenges did I face regarding the sociocultural environment?
2. How did I deal with these challenges in order to build my identity as an EFL student?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 English on expanding circle countries

The development of English in an expanding circle country is influenced by various challenges. The challenges that are often encountered here are often dealing with history, the sociocultural environment, and the role of the language itself (Holland et al; Widodo, et al., 2020; Ulla 2018 & 2021; Rivers, 2021). Recent

studies have shown how the challenges faced by students in expanding circle countries are in learning English as a foreign language. For example, Rivers (2021) examines the position of EFL towards the emotional attachment between their language and foreign language (e.g., English) in contemporary Japanese society. The results show that there is no influence of national commitment and patriotism on the position of English in Japan. It can be concluded that they have a deep love for their language and culture, so they don't want to be influenced by other language cultures. Therefore, this shows that the challenge faced by Japanese EFL in learning a foreign language is their love for their language and culture.

Furthermore, in the context of English education in Thailand, Ulla (2021) described the lack of interest of Thai people in English in their country led to a shortage of English teachers in Thailand. Because of this vacancy, many Filipino teachers work as English teachers there. Furthermore, Ulla (2018) identified English education in Thailand. In her research, she studied English teachers from the Philippines who taught in Thailand. The results of this study indicate that even though teaching English is one of the most popular jobs in Thailand (Ulla, 2018), Thai students feel that learning English is a boring lesson due to the lack of interest of students to learn English, then the lack of exposure and unsupportive environment for those who speak English.

More previous studies were conducted by Al-Nasser (2015) and Alkhannani (2021) regarding challenges in mastering and learning English in Saudi Arabia. Al-Nasser (2015) found that there were several problems faced in learning English there, such as the lack of interest of students to learn foreign languages, and the fear of learning in students because the class atmosphere was intimidating and hindered their participation. Furthermore, Alkhannani (2021) also revealed that there are several challenges faced by English learners such as sociocultural that is there. Alkhannani (2021) stated that there are several challenges in teaching and acquiring English such as interference from the first language, because remembering that Arabic and English are very different. The second is cultural influence, the attachment of their culture to Arabic causes negative views to arise regarding the erosion of their religious culture when learning foreign languages (e.g., English). Third are unprofitable learning practices, such as teaching English using their first language and the teaching model only refers to passing English exams. Fourth is the lack of use of English in their daily lives. The last one is foreign language anxiety.

## 2.2 English in Indonesia

Indonesia is an expanding circles country where the use of English is only used for international communication (Dardjowidjojo, 2000). Indonesia's inherent status as a country with the second largest diversity of languages in the world (Simons & Fennig, 2017; Zein, et al., 2020) poses its own challenges in terms of learning foreign languages (e.g., English). This is shown by several previous studies regarding the challenges faced in learning English in Indonesia such as (Abrar et al., 2018) exploring the speaking skills of Indonesian EFL students. In their research, it showed that some of the obstacles faced by Indonesian EFL students such as language barriers (e.g., lack of vocabulary mastery, grammar, and pronunciation.), psychological factors (e.g., anxiety,

negative attitude toward English and lack of motivation to speak English), learning environment (e.g., unsupportive environment) and language practice (e.g., rare use of English).

The subsequent research by Wahyuningsih & Afandi (2020), they examined how the problems faced by Indonesian EFL students in their speaking skills. This study found that the problems faced by EFL students in mastering their speaking skills included vocabulary mastery, poor grammar mastery, inaccurate pronunciation, lack of English input from outside the classroom, lack of confidence and lack of curriculum development related to speaking learning.

Moreover, Zein, et al. (2020) added regarding English language education in Indonesia which they summarized in a study of English language learning in Indonesia from 2011 to 2019. The results of the study show that there are several key observations regarding teaching English in Indonesia, the first is related to English pedagogy, this is related to concerns about limited teacher competence. The second is related to considerations of Indonesian linguistic ecology, this discussed the tensions that occur due to the introduction of English into the curriculum which has the potential to threaten the learner's multilingual background.

## 3. METHODS

Qualitative research is a type of research that emphasizes the aspect of in-depth understanding. Dörnyei (2007) explained that the form of qualitative research results is the product of the researcher's subjective interpretation of the data. Qualitative research itself has various forms, one of which is narrative inquiry. Barkhuizen, et al. (2013) stated that narrative inquiry is a type of research that uses stories as data. They explained that this narrative inquiry research emphasized more on stories about language teaching or learning. The form of narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning research which discusses personal experiences is called autobiographical narrative study.

This study uses autobiographical narrative study because the aspects in autobiographical studies discuss about narrative analysis, analysis of narratives and autobiography, and the data from this autobiographical research is the reflection of myself as a researcher. Therefore, on this basis, this study uses an autobiographical narrative inquiry research design, which is one of the types of narrative inquiry research that emphasizes personal experience in my language learning.

### 3.1 Participant and Context

The participant in this autobiographical narrative inquiry is me as a researcher who reflects on my learning experience while studying English which was full of challenges. Barkhuizen, et al. (2013) stated that autobiographical narrative inquiry as one type of qualitative research that is used to examine self-experiences is called personal experiences. I as a non-native English teacher (NNEST), reflect on various academic stories that I have passed in learning English. My academic experience in this matter began with the first time I learned English from the start of junior high school until I decided to go to college with the English Education study program.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The data from this autobiographical narrative study was collected from my reflections about my academic experience during the journey of learning English from junior high school to college

graduation. In reflecting on this academic journey, I frame it using LLHs (Language learning histories). Barkhuizen, et al. (2013) explained that LLHs are stories written about personal experiences in language learning. In this explanation, the scope of the period at LLH varies, ranging from the entire period during which a person has learned a language (referred to as a language learning career) or shorter periods (e.g., one year/one semester) (Benson 2011). Therefore, this research is included in the language learning career because the coverage of the period studied is more than one year.

### 3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

In analyzing the data, this research uses thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss 2008) for analyzing the data. I use this because it refers to the recommendations of Barkhuizen, et al. (2013) who stated that using thematic analysis in autobiographical narrative inquiry research can reveal complex problems related to language learning activities, language acquisition, and student development. Huynh and Rhodes (2011) also recommend thematic analysis to organize the narrative chronologically, list the major events discussed, and arrange titles that can connect the main topics that are relevant to the research question.

The procedure in the thematic analysis of Corbin & Strauss (2008) is divided into three stages. The first is open coding, in this stage, we carry out a careful data review of the data we have and then create code to capture ideas or themes in the data. The next is axial coding, in this case, we organize all the codes into major and minor levels to show the relationship between the codes. The last is selective coding, in this stage, we organize the code that has been found previously in the axial coding process, then illustrate the code in the final report and produce a new concept. This is referred to as grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss 2008).

## 4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this section, I found various challenges and interesting things that arise from my self-narration as an EFL learner from the first time I learned the language up to I finally like language.

### 4.1. Negative challenges

Common problems for foreign language learners in multicultural countries (e.g., Indonesia) are closely related to socio-cultural problems embedded in that environment (Lauder 2008; Rivers 2021). Therefore, there are some negative challenges that can affect someone in learning a foreign language such as the socio-cultural environment and learning environment.

#### a. Socio-cultural environment

Social and cultural are the most influential factors in policy regulations, especially in language policy, because this language policy is a product that is born from a phenomenon such as social and culture in an area. In this case, Indonesia is claimed to be a country that has the second most diversity of languages in the world (Simons & Fennig 2017). Therefore language policies and practices in this case are one of the factors that influence EFL students to be able to explore and practice their language in everyday life (Dardjowidjojo, 2000).

Furthermore, related to sociolinguistics in Indonesia, in this case, language varieties in Indonesia are categorized as *superglossia*, where the diversity of languages in Indonesia is divided into two types, such as High variation and Low

variation (Zein, et al., 2020). H variation is a language that is officially declared as the national language which is then used in various fields such as education, media, business, etc., while L variation is a language that is only used in certain areas, in this case, regional languages such as Javanese, Sundanese, etc. (Zein, et. al 2020). With these language rules applied, this is one of the challenges for foreign language learners who need an environment that supports them to improve their foreign language skills. This is one of the challenges I experienced in my journey to learn English.

Starting from the language setting, this creates many things that cause foreign language learners to find it difficult to express the language they are learning (e.g., English) such as the love for the local language and the national language makes the development of English in a multicultural country (e.g., Indonesia) difficult, moreover the fear that the coming western culture will change and even replace the original culture is a concern in this regard. As a result, this has had an impact on the development of English and their low awareness of learning English (especially in rural areas in Indonesia). It's the same with Rivers (2021), the language and culture of the Japanese people are so attached that they don't want to be influenced by other languages.

#### b. Unsupportive learning environment

In the learning environment, I was faced with various situations such as learning at an Islamic boarding school that applied bilingual arrangements (e.g., Arabic and English), then at a public school where the environment was very unsupportive of me to learning English, this was seen from the school environment. and also the teaching strategies that teachers use in class.

*“The intensity of the use of English in the Islamic boarding school area is still rare, this is because most of the students in the class and the boarding school environment, even the teachers, use Arabic as their main language of communication more often than using English”*

In general, Islamic boarding schools are Islamic educational institutions that have a characteristic where students are required to live in that place during the learning process. During the education period, there are several rules that must be obeyed by all students without exception, one of which is a bilingual program (e.g., English and Arabic) which requires all students to speak that language in their daily conversations. Based on the anecdote above, there is a gap in the practice of the language used there, because the education that is more emphasized in Islamic boarding schools is Islamic and character education. Therefore, the use of English in this Islamic boarding school is rarely seen, they prefer to use Arabic because the intensity of Arabic is more often used by students and teachers in daily communication in an Islamic boarding school environment. The anecdote above shows that the intensity of the use of language in a social environment is a big influence because in this case we still think that what is the point of mastering a language that is not used in everyday communication.

The next problem that I faced was related to education in public schools which did not give me any comfort in

learning foreign languages, especially English. Learning strategies at school are one of the triggers for not being interested in English. The teacher only uses lecture and storytelling methods, so learning is only centered on the teacher, while students tend to be passive and do not even listen to the teacher's explanations. Therefore, interesting variations of learning methods carried out by the teacher are also very important in building students' sense of interest in the lessons being delivered. In addition, providing motivation can also increase the interest of students to be more involved in learning.

#### 4.2. Positive Challenges

In this chapter, I found several positive challenges that caused me to be interested to learn English, including the failure that I had experienced while not being able to speak English, which made me passionate to learn English and the second was a supportive learning environment.

a. Failure

By changing the status of English to become an international language, the function of English here is very dominant. This is marked by the existence of rules that promote English as one of the languages which is the main requirement for entering college and also for getting a job and even in a better position. This shows that the development of English into an international language has changed everything, so mastery of English is often based on a higher status (Zein, 2020).

With these changes, as one of those people who can't speak English, I often encounter failures on my way to reaching my career. Failure is a process in which a person realizes the mistake he has made. Having this failure didn't make me give up, but it made me realize, get up and decide to learn English more deeply. In this case, it is in line with the opinion of Robinson (1995) which states that a lack of awareness can hinder success in learning.

b. Supportive learning environment

In the process of my journey to learning English at an English language course in Indonesia, I got many interesting experiences that made me enjoy learning English, this was related to the teaching strategies, rules and language policies that were there. When studying at an English language course I found things that were interesting to me, such as the rules of the language (English area) and also the enthusiasm for learning from all the students there, this is shown by how enthusiastic they are in practicing English every day and the commitment to be able to. This was also discussed by Thompson & Wheeler (2010) that in a good learning environment, two aspects influence it, such as the intellectual environment and the emotional environment. The intellectual environment includes standards, goals, and good learning strategies, while the emotional environment includes feelings of security in learning and getting support from the learning environment.

A supportive learning atmosphere is one of the factors that make someone feel comfortable in learning, as is the case with the anecdote below.

*"Learning English in courses does not recognize levels based on age, but based on students' English skills, therefore I learn English there starting from the lowest level by learning basic vocabulary, speaking, pronunciation and also learning tenses and other basic grammatical."*

Based on this anecdote, the nuances of learning that are designed in courses make someone feel comfortable in learning, and there is no fear and inferiority when the learning process takes place because we consider everything equal and the same.

Secondly, a good learning environment cannot be separated from the teaching strategies that the teacher uses. In this case, the teacher uses student-centered learning. So, every activity in the learning process always involves student activity. Thus, students will be trained to practice their language and also train students' courage to argue. During the learning process that I experienced there, the most memorable thing was learning speaking in which the students were fully active in the activity. The teaching strategy used in learning speaking is usually the teacher using debate as a speaking learning strategy, in which students are given a topic/problem, then students are asked to make arguments with each other.

#### 5. Conclusion

In this article, I have illustrated my narrative experience as an EFL student who has discussed the story of my journey in learning English in a multicultural country where the use of English is rarely used in daily communication. Based on existing research, there are few research that discusses the experiences and challenges faced by EFL students within the scope of a multicultural country. This article illustrates how the experience of learning English in a multicultural country is confronted with sociocultural situations and also the learning environment from an insider's perspective.

The results of this study indicate that the challenges in learning English in a multicultural country are influenced by social factors that can create a culture that they build so that it can influence the learning environment positively or negatively. The results of this study are also expected to be able to explore the extent to which the quality of education exists and can be a benchmark and also motivation to act for NNESTs teachers in particular and prospective teachers. Then this research can also be used as a reference for teachers, researchers, and policymakers to find the right strategy for this problem.

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