

A case on Thai students in EFL program in Indonesia (learning problems and strategies)

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate Thai students in EFL (English as Foreign Language) Program in Indonesia, focusing on the learning problems and strategies of nine Thai female students who study in English Department of IAIN Salatiga. This study uses descriptive qualitative design. The descriptive data analysis is employed to describe the research findings which are primarily mined from the transcriptions of in-depth interview. The results show that all Thai students have various problems during their study in Indonesia. The complication emerges when they must learn foreign languages and use them to learn at the same time. They must learn language skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking) on one hand and use those skills for practical or functional purposes on the other hand. It seems like one is not yet finished but they have to simultaneously practice it for functional purposes of communicating with the lecturers, understanding the tasks given, etc. We indicated that most strategies used by 6 participants were asking friends instead of teachers. Further, we also found distinct strategies personally preferred by the participants to learn EFL in their convenience.

Keywords: Thai students, EFL learning problems, EFL learning strategies

Introduction

Thailand, as the country that has never been colonized by any colonialisms or foreign countries, has both the advantage and the

weakness in term of International language mastery. One of the shortages is that insufficient skills and knowledge in learning other languages such as English as the international lingua franca (Baker, 2012). Thailand is now focusing on improving their language mastery of English because English is currently more commercial in ASEAN. They want to be competitive in integrating the students' English educational skills. However, in fact, the influence of English is apparently still low in Thailand (Baker, 2008).

Thailand is now entering the ASEAN English Community, therefore English is practically a medium tool for everyday communication and for careers. As a consequence, English is the key for all the member countries developing their human resources so as to compete in the local, national, or international job market in Asia. It is inevitable for Thai universities to urge students to have communication skills in English; Writing, Speaking, Reading, and Listening. Writing is a skill used in everyday life as well e.g. filling forms, taking messages, writing emails, or conducting business correspondence. Moreover, such skill is vital when some of the students participate in international environments such as studying overseas to further their education. Writing is seen as the most challenging skill for a significant number of Thai students (Sangiamchit, 2017).

Many of Thai students come to Indonesia without strong of English knowledge because none of them can communicate in English. However, some of them entering in English department in IAIN Salatiga adjusting difficulties to the new environment and lack of expected progress

in learning English and encounter in culture aspects of Indonesian, Java. They find themselves in an educational environment where the teaching style and learning context are different from their former experiences in terms of expectations, learning support, academic requirements, and Indonesia language as well. The problems, which leads to high disappointment, confusion and stress for Thai students in Indonesia, which is non-Thai speaking country. Nevertheless, students are trying to master the language of their disciplines and communicate with confidence and improving their both Indonesia and English language in the same time.

In 2014, STAIN Salatiga received 1,467 new students. Six of them were foreigners from Azizstan Foundation School of Pattani Thailand. The presence of Thai students was not for internships, observations, or study exchange, but they came to be as STAIN Salatiga students. However, Language Service Unit or Unit Pelayanan Bahasa (UPB) of STAIN Salatiga had provided a provisioning of Indonesia language or teaching Indonesia language to Thai students for a few month before taking the entrance exam or Ujian Masuk Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (UMPTAIN). In addition, the number of Thai students at IAIN Salatiga today is 20 students. Surprisingly, 10 of them choose to study in English major. It means that they have to study two languages at the same time. It challenges them for gaining the objective of academic at the institution.

According to Marcellino (2015) The linguistic situations and conditions in Indonesia are quite complex by their own natures as more

than seven hundred vernaculars with their various dialects from a great number of ethnic groups have been used as media of communication in the country. In view of that, the success of English teaching in Indonesia cannot be freed from the student's cultural backgrounds, values, customs, and beliefs toward this foreign language.

Musthafa (2010) states that the status of English as a foreign language in Indonesia and as "local content" in elementary school entailed extra hard work for teachers. He also stated that at least three reasons that brought the hard work to the English language teachers. First, English as a Foreign Language means that the language had very limited function in social intercourse in Indonesia. Learning English with no clear social function or no clear purpose could create a challenge to teachers because the student learning motivation toward the language could be low and chance of using the language outside classroom very limited. Second, English as local content, which meant very limited contact hours: two to four hours only per week, it was very low frequency of instructional, it virtually encountered preventing skills development of the learners. Third, as the decision to teach English to young learners was not complemented with a systematic pre-service and in-service training.

On the other hand, Musthafa (2009) stated that ELT in universities differed from ELT in secondary schools in various aspects, including its status, number of hours, instructional objectives, teaching methods, and instructional materials. Each higher learning institution enjoyed autonomy in determining all these matters, making ELT at this

educational level variable not only across institutions but also across departments in the same university. More specifically, with the exception of departments of English, some universities or colleges offered English as a required course, other institutions offered English courses as an optional.

Moreover, universities differ in the way they treat English as an academic course. All share the realization that proficiency in English is important to students' academic success since a large number of college-level textbooks are written in English. Nevertheless, Musthafa (2010) states that two or four credit units of on-campus formal English instruction made a difference for university students, considering the fact that some 736 hours of English in junior and senior high school did not seem to equip students with the skills required to read textbooks on their own.

According to Fisher, Rothenberg & Frey (2008), language learning in the classroom is designed as a tool to guide English teachers in designing purposeful and powerful lessons that accelerate the achievement of students who learn English. However, doubtfully those Thai students are still seeking for extra English course, especially in improving their English. May be the phenomenal reflected to the problem of pedagogical management in classrooms. The students are not good at English. Perhaps they could pass exam without any difficulty but they still find it difficult to communicate in English.

On the contrary, there are many individuals' traits that contribute to success, especially the ways of learning a foreign language. As Stated

(Rubin & Thompson, 1994) the learner, is the most important factor in the language learning process. Success or failure will, in the end, be determined by what student themselves contribute. However, to help students improve their English, it is necessary to find ways to help them overcome their problems, their flawed of learning strategies and their difficulties in the learning. Additionally, Indonesian teachers need to know what problems and difficulties that make their Thai students cannot learn well, so that these matters can be dealt effectively to help the students improve their English, moreover, to build Thai students awareness of how their learning strategies are influential for their success in learning English. This study is intended to investigate the reasons why most Thai students cannot improve their English, their learning problems as well as strategies.

Srikrai, Lin, Lakaisone and Sirinthorn (2016) indicate in their study that writing in an academic style was found the highest difficulty among the non-native English postgraduate students in Thai university, followed by paraphrasing and synthesizing essays, reports, dissertations, theses, research paper, and articles. Moreover, Iamla-ong (2013) states that specifically at MFU Thailand university (396 students/ participants), they had less difficulties as the passive learners, and more problems activating or expressing their opinions in an academic way. Besides, this research shows that keep using English language as a medium of instruction can reduce the language learning problems significantly. In addition, Kannan (2009) states that the learner, whose first and second languages were non

alphabetical, had never been taught the sound/letter rules system of English, and this fundamental deficit played a pivotal role in her poor classroom attendance, wavering motivation to learn and practice English, and ultimately, in her lack of progress. Implications included the need for basic sound/letter training to be implemented in basic ESL programs, especially for non alphabetic first language learners. For another consideration, Permata (2013) highlights that her study on foreign language learning strategies preference involving 41 males and 80 female students of English department in STAIN Salatiga shows no gender significant difference or determinant factor, in term of their accomplishment.

Research methods

To have a depth understanding on the issue around foreign language learners' problems and strategies, we use descriptive qualitative approach (Issac & Michael, 1984; Sandelowski, 2000; Talbot, 1995; Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). It is not statistical elaboration. Instead, the data are primarily resulted from the interviews which are transcribed subsequently. The related depth interviews are delivered using Thai language, Patani language, Malaya language, and Indonesian language in order that the participants could explicate every thought that appear in their mind clearly.

One of us is a Thai student who has been studying in English department for almost four years, which means that all of the participants

in this study has been observed by the researcher since they first start studying English at IAIN Salatiga. However, the researcher role is emic (use participants' viewpoint), asks probing rather questions, then listens, then thinks, then asks more probing question to get to deeper levels of the conversation, in collecting the data. Nevertheless, in interpreting the data the researcher author is etic (use researcher viewpoint). In another word, the researcher starts, as a member of a group then becomes a more objective observant in order to achieve target goal of the research.

Subject of the research

The participants of the research are three students of third semester, two students of fifth semester, and four students of seventh semester, or nine students in total. All of them are female Thai students who study in English department at IAIN Salatiga. The participants are asked to fill the questionnaires and answer the question of interview. There are five sections of the research questions, first and second sections are questionnaires, consist of the demographics backgrounds of Thai students, and their learning English objectives. Third, fourth, and fifth sections are the questions of the interview, it consists of their expectations in learning English at IAIN Salatiga, Thai English students personal, socio cultural problems in learning, and their learning strategies.

Technique of the Data Collection

In data collection of this study, the interview is the primary method of data collection, and the interviewee's responses are the primary unit of analysis. All of the interview questions are translated into Thai language to

see the learning problems and their learning strategies. In order to assess the difficulties in the learning, the researchers use face-to-face interview with in-depth interview to Thai students one by one then describe the finding from the interview. The procedures in collecting data are as follows:

- The researchers conduct the interview, which process of recording with an audio recorder by mobile phone with permission of the interviewee, and the interviewee's confidentiality, voluntary status, and the interviewee have a right to stop the process of recording at any time. Note taking is simultaneously applied.
- The researchers listen to the recorded interview a number of times in order to immerse the researcher mind in the words and thoughts of the interviewee to clarify, check for validity, draw out the interviewee's opinions, and experiences.
- The researchers start the process of making the transcripts immediately after getting data from the interview by translating from Thai language into English language.

Technique of the Data Analysis

After getting the data, the next step is analyzing the data from the questionnaires and the interview. The researcher uses flow style of qualitative data analysis; those phases are data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing (Engel & Schutt, 2005). To analyze the data in this study, the researcher uses coding method. According to Creswell, (2002)

coding is the process of segmenting labeling text to form descriptions and broad them in the data. Coding process is to make sense out of the text data. The name of nine participants in this study are coded “PS” instead of revealing their real names. The steps of data analysis in this study are:

- Reading the transcripts quickly, scanning the whole and then identify the Thai students English language learning problems, and their learning strategies by highlighting with different colors on the transcripts.
- Re-reading the transcripts again one by one, line by line very carefully to classify the data.
- Labeling relevant pieces, such as words, phrases, sentences, or sections, which is what the researcher think is relevant.
- Reducing and organizing the data into some categories, then displaying the data as narrative text or composition.

Technique of the data Interpretation

Interpretation involves making sense of the data as described by Creswell, (2002). Interpretation in qualitative research means that the research steps back and forms some larger meaning about the phenomenon based on personal views, comparisons with past studies, or both.

Results and Discussions

In 2014, Pattanian students came to study in Salatiga Islamic campus. The students were from Pattani, south of Thailand where the majority of the population is Malay Muslim. They make up about 88 percent of its

population. The people speak the Patani Malay language, although most of them are also able to speak Thai. The Pattani Malays are similar in ethnicity and culture to the Malays of Kelantan, Malaysia. Pattani located in the Muslim populated area where the unrest has erupted since 2004 until present days. The students' origin is from the restricted areas who speak Pattani Malay as their first language. This Malay ethnicity and culture, residing as in a Buddhist country started learning Thai, a national language, in school compound at the age of six. The society is mostly bilingual in which Arabic language is practiced for religious purpose.

For all the participants, English language as fourth language for them. Their main problems were about understanding the language, both English and Indonesian. The data collected shows that all of the participants had the same problem, which was about understanding the language that was used by their teachers in the classroom. Moreover, all of those questions and answers were the beginning of the interview. All the participants mentioned that they did not understand clearly the lesson inside the classroom. They even faced several difficulties since the beginning of the class.

Another thing, they were shy in case of making interaction with the teachers or in certain situation insisting them to speak or respond in English form. Their shyness was because of lack of English proficiency and confident in arranging words or questions, as well as to speak up in English in the classroom or outside the classroom and in practicing with their friends. In addition, most of the participants did not understand

much about the lesson that was taught by the lectures. Consequently, they felt unconfident. That was why they just kept silence in class. Moreover, most of them had rarely been asked by their teachers whether they could comprehend the lesson or not.

“I am afraid to ask my teacher. When I do not understand the lesson, I want to ask my teacher but I do not how to ask. Moreover, when my friends present their presentation in the classroom, I want to ask them, but I do not know how to ask. Sometime I think I still confuse with the language, something like that. Nowadays I think there is about 20% in a lesson, which when teacher explain but I cannot understand. But some teacher usually ask me like “which one that you do not understand?” they seem care about me, such as Mr. Roko, Mr. Saadi, Mr. Hanung they always ask me, like “do you understand clearly”, something like that.” (PS 2)

Most of them did not asked their teachers directly but their mostly asked their friends instead, only PS 7 said that she went to her teacher desk then asked the teacher by herself. However, all of seem did not active in the classroom even though they did not understand the lesson. The environment in the class did not allow them to communicate. In fact, in campus or in classroom was the only place for them to communicate in English with their teachers or their friends, but this opportunity was not use its benefits. Nonetheless, because of their ability to understand the materials or the lesson was not occurring very wells, consequently, their encountered in doing the homework as well. The difficulty in understanding the language causes an obstacle to comprehend the materials and the lectures that are provided by the teachers. Some of the

teachers were not write down the homework's instruction for students when ordering the homework. For Thai students it was not easy to understand the orders that are provided by their teachers.

All Thai students have just the same English language learning problems. They had the same problem on comprehending the language and did not understand much about the material or the lesson in the classroom. They did not really understand the instruction very much; except PS 7 thought that, it was no difficulties for her to understand and to do the homework. However, as the transcript showed PS 7 was depend on her friends as same as the others participants as well. In addition, the background of the participants and their learning style had similarity, which was relying on their friend. It was evident that they did not use much strategy of learning the new language autonomously. Unfortunately, the habit of note-taking or writing in English seems hardly to practice, especially for those in beginning or middle level of English proficiency.

Learning Strategies

The ability to learn English effectively for Thai student in non-English speaking country may have a very difficult time in learning and using English, it may show very little progress. Moreover, to learn English in non-English and non-Thai speaking country as in Indonesia, it increases more complicatedness in the learning. Nonetheless, to own some of effective strategies toward learning may help the participants coping with their problems or difficulties. This section reveals about the English

learning strategies of the participants, which found in transcribes or the result of the interview. In addition, the data in this section presents their English learning strategies in general.

The major problem encountered by Thai students was about comprehending the new languages. The most popular or common strategy used by them was social strategy. All of the participants coped with the problem by asking to their friends for the explanations when they did not understand the language. We indicated that most strategies used by 6 participants were asking friends instead of teachers as well as using Google Translation to translate words or sentences. One of the common strategy that used by Thais is regarding social strategy, which to ask their friends. According to Oxford (1990), social strategies are identified as asking questions to get verification, asking for clarification of a confusing point, asking for help in doing a language task, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms. Social strategies help the learner work with others.

As another strategy, 4 of 9 participants preferred to watch Thai English teacher from YouTube. Further investigation lead to various learning strategies used by Thai students to improve their English skills. 3 (three) participants chose reading story books which were supportive for new vocabs exploitation. 3 (three) participants seemed to be audio-visual type in which more time spent with movies, songs and the like. 2 participants consistently pushed themselves to study (no reserve). 2 participants memorized text before having classroom performance. 2

participants trusted their notes of underlining and circling several words for text-related tasks. 2 participants just required their family to boost up their motivation. 2 participants relied on explanations in Thai language from the internet, while 2 participants considered writing a diary as an effective learning strategy.

The rest strategies could be categorized as personal strategies of the respondents in which each item emerged discretely or revealed by one participant only. Those strategies are trying to enjoy the lesson, looking at the example from friend's work, noting unfamiliar vocabs or keywords, replaying the videos repeatedly, using mobile phone keyboard to help spelling the words, texting in English, cooperating with friend to arrange words, making vocabulary lists, explaining unfamiliar word using easy words, self-rewarding or self-motivating, watching people talking about motivation on YouTube, reading past stories in own diary, reading diary, reading past stories, being friendly with the teachers and asking peers to check the understanding.

As the data indicated, the participants' strategy depended on their fellows, when they did not understand the languages in the classroom they always turned to their friends to clarify. However, sometimes they tried hard to translate the languages by themselves if they had a textbooks or sheets that were provided before having presentations in the classroom. Some of the participants said that if teachers wrote down on the whiteboard, so that the learners could underline or jot down into their notebook or brought the topics back to their house then study it by

themselves. All of them used Google Translate so that they could translate in a whole sentence or paragraphs.

The strategy that was used mostly for improving the listening skill was listening to songs and some of them used movies or videos, which had Thai subtitles or Indonesian subtitles. Nevertheless, they did not have much chance to use the strategy for improving their speaking skill. It seemed like they could not change the environments for supporting them in term of learning the new languages, as well as changing their individual habits to maintain the process of new languages learning. The participants tended to follow the environment, which was not support them in learning the new languages. However, the strategy for improving reading and writing skills were rarely used, except in an inevitable situation like when the teachers ordered them to hand in the homework or when they had to perform or speak English in front of the class. They looked unwilling to deal with reading and writing strategies unless they were forced to.

Conclusion

It is obvious that Thai students faced diverse problems in EFL learning in Indonesia as the second home of their international records. They got scholarship to study in Indonesia but then they must deal with either English or Bahasa Indonesia used formally for teaching and learning, especially in English programs. The complication emerges when they must learn foreign languages and use them to learn at the same time. They must learn language skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking) on one hand

and use those skills for practical or functional purposes on the other hand. It seems like one is not yet finished but they have to simultaneously practice it for functional purposes of communicating with the lecturers, understanding the tasks given, etc.

Given those conditions, the teachers must keep developing their teaching strategies to help the students reaching the objectives. The strategies must consider the flexibility of implementation for multimodal learning environment and distinct learning styles. Therefore, it is recommended that the teachers and the students of teacher training program to take benefits from classroom action research design to get involved in this issue. However, further studies can also be conducted in the same qualitative form to investigate much deeper in the area of students' motivation, especially from the scholarship grantee living in a multi 'foreign' language context.

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