Long Walk to Quality Improvement: Investigating Factors Causing Low English Proficiency among Indonesian EFL Students

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Abstract: Indonesian students have learned English for many years from elementary to university. However, English proficiency among most Indonesian students is not improved significantly. Therefore, this qualitative research with case study approach aims to find out factors causing low English proficiency among Indonesian university students. There were six heterogeneous participants coming from all over Indonesia in this research that the researchers got through purposive sampling. The data were collected mainly through individual interview. All interview data were recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and divided into themes. To develop the trustworthiness of the research, the researcher did member checking. The findings show that there were two major factors causing Indonesian university students have low English proficiency namely internal and external factors. Internal factors consist of low motivation and learning anxiety, and external factors consist of inappropriate teaching method, class size, and poor English environment. Further, suggestions and recommendations are offered to all related parties.

Keywords: Internal, External, Factors, Low English Proficiency, Indonesia, EFL University Students.

1 INTRODUCTION

Language proficiency refers to knowing both grammatical systems of language and the ability to apply that knowledge in language interaction [1]. Further, Canale and Swain [2] developed a framework where language proficiency was based on three elements: grammatical or linguistic, sociocultural and strategic competencies. Therefore, it can be concluded that one parameter to measure whether students have already mastered English skill is through their proficiency. Thus, a specific test is needed to measure the English proficiency of the students. Nowadays, the most common ways of knowing students’ English proficiency is by taking TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) since the test consists three out of four major skills in English (listening, reading, and writing). The main purpose of TOEFL test is to measure English proficiency among non-native speakers of English [3]. Ironically, most Indonesian students are unsuccessful in developing English proficiency despite of learning English for many years since in elementary or even in kindergarten to university. In this regard, Diana [4] revealed that the average TOEFL score among Indonesian students is lower than 500. Within this issue, many researchers have given high attention to explore factors causing low English proficiency [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19]. The previous studies revealed some significant factors causing low English proficiency for instance: negative attitude of classmates [6], [10], [8], teacher competence [6], [7], [8], [12], [13], [16], [17], [18], [19], inappropriate class material [8], [10], [12], [16], [17], low motivation [5], [12], [18], learning anxiety [14], [18], inappropriate teaching method [7], [8], [9], [15], [16], [18], [19], class environment [6], [10], [12]. These findings have given clear and much information toward the issue which causing low English proficiency. However, even though there were plenty of studies conducted in this issue, none of the studies conducted in university level, especially in Indonesian context. Exploring factors which causing low English proficiency (measured by low TOEFL score) among university students is very important, especially those who are majoring in English department. It is because these university students are still having low English proficiency despite of learning English for many years. In this regard, Indonesian university students have learnt English for at least 9 years. Therefore, the current research aims to explore factors causing low English proficiency among Indonesian EFL university students who majoring in English department to broader the knowledge toward the issue.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Problems of Learning English

There are many problems which causing low proficiency among English students. One of them is inadequate qualified English language teachers. Adedokun [20] identifies that English teachers which poorly trained were employed to teach significantly contributed to poor performance of English students. Further, negative attitude toward English is also an important factor which also contributed to poor performance of the students. Mohammad [21] stated that negative attitude toward English among the students make teachers more difficult in teaching the language. It is because mastering all
skills in English such as listening, speaking, reading and writing require hard work from the students. In this regard, negative attitude will surely make the students hard to achieve those goals. Another important factors which also causing poor performance of English among the students is improper use of teaching method. Teaching method is really important to increase students’ participation in learning. Therefore, an appropriate teaching method should be implemented by the teachers. Similarly, Ya’u [22] also revealed that using appropriate teaching method is always associated with the successful learning. English teachers should always consider some important aspects in choosing the proper method to be implemented in their classroom, for instance age of the students, topic to be discussed, time, and background of students.

2.2 TOEFL

TOEFL is one among some standardized language tests for measuring proficiency for foreign language learners. The tests are designed by Educational Testing Service (ETS) based in New Jersey, U.S.A. The test was firstly conducted in a paper-based in the early 1960’s [23]. The test consists of three major sections such as listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension. Then, a computer-based TOEFL (BBT TOEFL) was developed in 1998 which included Test of Written English (TWE), but later replaced by internet-based TOEFL (iBT TOEFL) [24]. There were some differences between iBT and PBT TOEFL in some aspects of the test. iBT TOEFL offers both English written and spoken tests while structure and written expression, which were tested in PBT has been excluded in the iBT TOEFL [25]. However, iBT TOEFL is not required in many universities in non-English speaking countries due to its unaffordability. Therefore, PBT TOEFL is the alternative [26].

3 RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This research was conducted in qualitative research with a descriptive approach to describe factors causing low English proficiency among Indonesian university students. Qualitative method is chosen in order to inform a complete understanding of research problems academically. According to Creswell [27] qualitative research was carried out in a natural setting without manipulating the data. In this research, researchers focus on the participants’ point of view, exploring participants’ experiences and finally provide rich narrative descriptions.

3.2 Research Site and Participants

This study was conducted in a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia where heterogeneous students who coming from all provinces in Indonesia are studying. There were 6 students participated in this research that the researchers got through purposive sampling in voluntary basis. Merriam [28] stated that purposive sampling emphasize on selection criteria for the chosen participants in which the researcher can discover, understand, and gain more insight on crucial issues for the study. The main criteria of choosing the participants is depend on their TOEFL score (lower than 500). Thus, to gather the data and achieving the goal of this research, the researchers choose 6 low proficiency students to be interviewed. Further, the participants’ name involved in this research were pseudonyms in order to respect the participants’ privacy. The participants’ ages are between 22 and 26 years old. The demographic information of the participants can be seen in Table 1.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This research utilized semi-structured interview as the primary instruments of data collection. The researchers used a semi-structured interview in order to get in-depth data or ideas from the participants. The researchers adopted as well as adapted some questionnaires and interview questions from some previous studies, combine and edit them to make it more suitable and relevant with the purpose of this research. The interview sections were conducted in three weeks in Sept, 2019 based on the availability of the participants. Each interview sections last for about 25-30 minutes explore their perceptions toward factors causing their low English proficiency. The interview sections were guided with one major questions of the research: what factors causing low English proficiency among Indonesian university students. Further, the interview sections were carried out using local language in order to give free space for the participants to explore their opinions. For data analysis, the researchers did three main procedures. First, the researchers transcribed all interview sections with all participants manually. Thus, these activities take a lot of times. Then, transcripts were carefully read line by line, codified, and divided into themes to be presented. Finally, to establish the trustworthiness of the research or to verify the data accuracy, the researchers did member checking. Patton [29] stated that member checking exist when all transcripts data were given back to the participants that have been interviewed to make sure what they said are right.

4 FINDINGS

Based on the interview sections the researchers got two major themes which are internal and external factors which mainly causing low English proficiency among Indonesian EFL university students as indicate in Table 2.
4.1 Internal Factors

In this theme, our participants were explored about their internal factors associated with their problems achieving high English proficiency. The findings demonstrated that most participants agreed that one significant factor causing them to have low English proficiency come from within. The first internal factor, low motivation, happens because of failing in entering their first priority department. Five out of six participants admit that their first priority when entering university was not English department. Their first priority was mainly health department, engineering department, chemistry department and flight department. Further, they also admit that taking English department is never comes to their mind before knowing that they were not passing their priority department. This factor, in fact, is influencing participants’ motivation to learn English. However, there were no bodies who force the participants in taking English department.

To be honest, my first priority was not English. I intended to be an engineering student, but I did not make it happen. I choose English department in my second priority. (LS 6)

When I was asked to choose departments in university, I choose flight department because I really want to be a flight attendant, but my parents did not allow me. Then, I took health department as my priority. I have taken test in some universities to enter health department, but fail. And finally, here I am, in English department. (LS 2)

My first priority when entering this university was chemistry department. But I did not make it through and I accepted in English department. Basically I do not have any other choices and stuck here. (LS 3)

The data above indicate that participants’ priority department is really crucial in improving learning motivation among Indonesian university students. In addition, the participants also share their stories that when they found any difficulties of learning English, their motivations become more and more decrease. Dealing with this problem, the participants just followed the class with no high intention to study. On the other hand, the participant who is interested in learning English and placing English department as his first priority did not has the same problem of low motivation.

I love to learn English so that if you ask me my first priority department is absolutely English department. (LS 5)

My motivations in learning English are undoubted, but due to some circumstances, it is hard for me to achieve high English proficiency or high TOEFL score. (LS 5)

This data, in fact, demonstrated that having high motivation is not enough to achieve high English proficiency since external factors are also important in helping students to achieve high English proficiency. Beside low motivation due to failing to enter their priority department, learning anxiety is undeniably another internal factor which causing low English proficiency revealed by the participants. The participants admit that they are afraid of making mistakes when trying to speak, read, and write in English.

…another factor makes me inconvenience of learning English is my anxiety of making mistakes. I do not know, I just feel shame when making mistakes because people know that I am in English department, so I should not make any mistakes. (LS 2)

If making mistakes in front of my colleagues, it does not problem for me. But, when making mistake with another people or when facing good students, I feel shame when making mistakes because my English ability is really standard. (LS 4)

I know it is learning, but still, I feel uncomfortable when making any mistakes either in oral or written English. (LS 3)

4.2 External Factors

Another important issue which influencing students’ low English proficiency that revealed by the participants was external factors. This factors were triggered mostly because inappropriate teaching method applied by their lecturers in their classroom. Even though the participants admit that all of their lecturers are qualified in term of their educational background, but, in fact, the participants revealed that their teaching methods is not appropriate for them.

I think all of my lecturers are qualified, but somehow their teaching method like lecturing is boring for me. (LS 1)

You know, every student has different abilities, but my lecturers seem to deny that fact. They just keep talking and talking and I do not understand at all. (LS 2)

In the beginning, it is easy to learn English, but later it is hard for me to catch up all the lessons. (LS 6)

Not surprisingly external factors are also significantly influencing students’ low English proficiency. The data above show that English lessons were not easy, especially for those students who are not having high motivations to learn English. Further, even though the participants revealed that it was easy to learn English at the beginning, but later it become challenging and hard to understand the lesson given by their
lecturers. In addition, class size is also revealed by the participants as their problems in learning English which result low English proficiency.

...Yes, there are so many students in the classroom which sometimes make me hard to focus on the lessons. (LS 5)

The class facilities are fine, but the class size I think is not appropriate. There are so many students and sometimes a bit noisy. (LS 3)

For me, the huge class size is somehow is usual in Indonesia, but our ability is not same. There are students who have good ability in English; there are also average and low ability students. The problem is that our lecturers seem to focus only on those smart students. (LS 1)

Not only having problems in the class, the participants also admit that learning environment outside the class was also poor. As a foreign language, English is not widely spoken in Indonesia; therefore it makes the participants struggle very hard to improve their English proficiency.

...You know, English is not spoken in our environment, and the learning in the classroom is absolutely not enough. (LS 4)

... We only hear, read, speak, and write in English only in the classroom, even most of the time we also use Indonesian language, and after the class finish, practicing English is also finish (LS 3)

The participants revealed that their internal factors (low motivation and learning anxiety) were worst by external factors (Inappropriate teaching method, class size, and poor English environment) which perfectly influencing their low English proficiency. The participants admit that it was not easy to learn English when their lecturers did not use the appropriate teaching method. In addition, the participants realized that every students have different styles of learning, thus somehow their lecturers teaching styles seem best for some students, and inappropriate for some other students. Further, poor English environment is also a significant factor which contributed in students’ low English proficiency.

5 DISCUSSION

The finding Based on the findings of this study, it is revealed that there were two major factors, namely internal (low motivation and learning anxiety) and external (inappropriate teaching methods and class size) factors which influencing low English proficiency among Indonesian university students. The findings also show that the participants have already learnt English for years as well as familiar with TOEFL and have taken TOEFL many times. However, it is interesting to be noted that even though the fact that the participants have learnt English for years, familiar with TOEFL, taken TOEFL so many times, the participants fail to achieve high score of TOEFL. In this regard, the participants’ TOEFL scores in this research are only between 450 and 495. Further, the majority of the findings in this research seem to support the previous research which found that primary factors influencing students’ low English proficiency were internal; low motivation [5], [12], [18], and learning anxiety [14], [18]; External; inappropriate teaching method [7], [8], [9], [15], [16], [18], [19], and class size [6], [10], [12]. However, an interesting finding emerges as a new finding in this issue which is poor English environment. It is mainly because English is a foreign language in Indonesia, therefore not widely spoken in the surroundings. Firstly, the internal factors revealed by the participants in this research were mostly because of low motivation and learning anxiety in learning English. Participants’ low motivation was mainly due to the fact that English department was not their priority when entering university. Thus, their motivation to learn English is not as high as the one who choose English department as his priority. This factor, in fact decreases their motivation in learning and therefore giving negative attitude toward English [5], [12], [18]. Further, learning anxiety therefore become another internal factors revealed by the participants which influence their low English proficiency. Learning anxiety was mainly because the participants did not have good English ability compared to other students which have high English proficiency. Therefore, the participants feel shame with other students when making any mistakes. This finding was relevant with previous studies [14], [18] who also identified that one among many internal factors influencing students’ low English proficiency was anxiety in learning. Further, when the students have high anxiety in learning, it means they have poor strategies of learning and therefore the students will easily give up when they found some struggle [14], [18]. Secondly, all participants shared their stories that internal factors were perfectly worse by external factors which influence their low English proficiency. The external factors revealed by the participants in this research were mainly due to inappropriate teaching method applied by their lecturers, class size, and poor English environment. Even though, all participants agree that all their lecturers are qualified in term of their educational background, but most participants cannot deny that their teaching method was not appropriate for them. Further, the participants admit that in the beginning, they can easily to understand the lesson, but later it hard for them to catch up the lessons due to inappropriate teaching method applied by their lecturers. In this situation, the participants only coming and joining the class without understanding the material taught by their lecturers. Thus, it was not enrich the participants’ knowledge toward English. Inappropriate teaching method identified as one of external factors in this research was relevant to previous studies [7], [8], [9], [15], [16], [18], [19]. Similarly, another external factors, class size, which influencing low English proficiency identified by [6], [10], [12] in line with the finding of this research. The class size which is noisy makes the participants hard to focus on the lessons. In addition, participants realized that they were having different ability in learning English which make the participants who have low English proficiency hard to catch up the lesson. Lastly, this research revealed an interesting finding which emerges as a new finding in this issue which is poor English environment. In Indonesian context, English is considered as a foreign language; therefore, it is undoubtedly that English was not spoken in the surroundings.
6 Recommendation
This research has explained detailed and deep perceptions of the participants toward the factors which causing Indonesian university students to have low English proficiency. Finally, based on the findings, it is recommended for lecturers and other related parties to motivate their students to learn English in and outside the classroom, especially for those who take English department not as their first priority. Furthermore, lecturers are also suggested to applied teaching and learning activities which trigger high confidence of the students. Most importantly, lecturers have to realize that their students have different ability and have their own learning styles. In such situation, lecturers need to have various teaching methods applied in their classroom in order benefits all the students.

References

