

Developing Second and Foreign Language Proficiency: Insight from the learners

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of two learners' experiences in learning Indonesian and English. One of the learners is from the Philippines and the other is from Thailand. As the study was conducted, they were studying in an English language teaching program at an Indonesian university. The two learners maintained quite unique learning experiences in that both of them neither had knowledge of nor communicative skills in Indonesian language prior to coming to Indonesia. Although they faced lots of difficulty at first, both of them were able to communicate in Indonesian language fluently after some period of living and studying in Indonesia. As regards their proficiency in English, however, there was a marked difference in that although both of them had learned English for years prior to their undergraduate study, only one of them managed to develop high level of proficiency in English. Interviews were carried out to reveal their learning experiences and to see the factors that might have shaped

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their level of proficiency in both Indonesian and English. The results indicated that there were a number of factors that might have strongly shaped the different level of their proficiency.

Keywords: second language learning, foreign language learning, language learning contexts

Introduction

Studies in the field of second language learning have provided us with very useful insight as to how inner factors, such as aptitude, age and motivation, relate to the development of second language proficiency (e.g. Dörnyei and Chan, 2013; Kormos, et al. 2011; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003). Likewise, there are also lots of studies in the field conducted in instructional contexts which also provide us with very useful theoretical and practical insight about the relative efficacy of particular instructional conditions on enhancing the learners' proficiency in the target language (e.g. DeKeyser, 2007; Long, et al. 1998; Robinson, 1996; VanPatten, 1996). On the other hand, there are only few studies conducted that can provide us with fruitful insight concerning the nature of second language learning in the social contexts. In other words, the social domains of second language learning have so far remained a neglected area (see Hulstijn, et al. 2014 for more detailed discussion). As such, not much is known as to how social factors like access to the target language or access to communicate with the native speakers, for instance, relate to the success or failure in second language learning. Stemming from this gap, this study was conducted. In essence, it attempted to understand how learning contexts affect the process and outcomes of second language learning.

Literature Review

Good language learners

Research has revealed a number of characteristics that good second language learners share. The characteristics suggest that good second language learners are those who are willing and accurate guessers, have a strong will to communicate in the target language and learn from the communication, are willing to make mistakes when learning and communicating, are attentive to form, do a lot of practice, monitor their own and others' speech, and are attentive to meaning (Rubin, 1975, pp. 45-47). These characteristics of good second language learners

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are very useful and have been used in a wide range of studies dealing with second language learners. However, as Rubin (1975) herself noted, more systematic and deeper observation about the characteristics still need to be carried out (p. 48), and to do so, researchers will need to consider a number of factors which can affect the course of learning itself, including the contexts where it takes place (Rubin, 1975, p. 49).

The call for contextually-bound second language learning research has actually been put forward occasionally in many second language research publications. Norton and Toohey (2001), for instance, claimed that “Our research and recent theoretical discussions have convinced us that understanding good language learning requires attention to social practices in the contexts in which individuals learn L2s [second languages]” (p. 318). As well, Lightbown and Spada (1999) contended that naturalistic settings might offer better opportunity for the learners to execute more meaningful practice in using the target language as compared with classroom settings (p. 91). Still, it is only recently that the researchers begin to really acknowledge the importance of investigating the roles of social or learning contexts in the process and outcomes of second language learning (see Hulstijn, et al. 2014).

In regard specifically to learning a language in a context where it is not widely used in the community but is only restricted to classroom contexts (such is the case of foreign language learning), one key factor that determines a high degree of success in mastering the target language is related to the learners’ agency (Oxford, 2008), i.e. the ability to compensate the lack of exposure to the input of the target language through employing certain strategies of learning. The importance of maintaining agency in the process of learning a second language is confirmed by lots of studies. In one study, for instance, Muhlisin and Salikin (2015) found that among three variables investigated: the length of instructional experience, the perceptions of and habits in learning English grammar by adult Indonesian EFL learners, only the learners who developed sense of agency (*sic.* self-directed learning habits) managed to develop ample proficiency. Likewise, in a study dealing with high and low proficient Chinese learners of English, Wong and Nunan (2011) found that among a number of factors investigated, the main characteristics of good (*sic.* effective) second language learners included the characteristics of being communicative, active and field independent. On the contrary, poor second language learners exhibit the characteristics of being “authority-oriented, field-dependence and passivity” (p. 152).

Language learning styles and strategies

Language learning styles refer to “general approaches to language learning” (Cohen, 2003, p. 279), whereas language learning strategies refer to “specific behaviors that learners select in their language learning and use” (ibid.).

Insofar second language learning is concerned, in addition to the general learning styles such as visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic, there are also styles which relate specifically to process of learning a second language. These styles include communicative, analytical, authority-oriented and concrete (Willing 1994 in Wong and Nunan, 2011). As defined by Wong and Nunan (2011), the communicative style refers to the style where learners tend to use the target language in order to learn it. The analytical style, on the other hand, refers to the style where learners like doing problem solving tasks, such as analysing set of words on page. The authority-oriented style refers to the style where learners are largely dependent on the teachers or other learners to help them learn the target language, while the concrete learning style refers to the style where learners prefer learning the target language with the help of concrete objects and activities. These four types of language learning style, however, are not exclusive in that they operate in a degree of continuum. In other words, learners with a communicative learning style, for instance, will not always feel daunted when asked to study grammar of the target language through abstract reasoning. However, such learners are likely to perform better when the tasks given require them to produce output in the target language.

As regards second language learning strategies, Oxford (1990) pointed out six strategies that are usually used by second language learners in learning a second language. These strategies include memory, cognitive, compensation, meta-cognitive, affective, and social strategies. All of these strategies, according to Cohen (2003), are executed by the learners in practice in conjunction with the type of task and their learning style.

Methodology

This study employed a narrative methodology to understand certain phenomena related to second language learning. In particular, this study set to explore different practice of second language learning of two international students studying English in an Indonesian university. These two students maintained quite unique learning experience in that they studied English in a country where English is not used as a native language. Furthermore, the new community

where the two students were immersed both academically and socially speak different language from theirs too. In such a case, the two students were compelled to also learn the language of the new community as well. In that case, they learned two different languages simultaneously (English and Indonesian). In accordance with the contexts where the two languages are used, it was assumed, therefore, that the students would gain more access to Indonesian language than to English, for the latter was mainly used only in instructional contexts. Still, both English and Indonesian constituted the students' second language in that they were learned after their first or native language.

The two students started their study in Indonesia between 2012 and 2014. One of the students started his study two years before the other one. Also, the two students were from two different countries. The first student, Rodi (a pseudonym) was from the Philippines and the other one, Liam (also a pseudonym), was from Thailand. By the time this study was conducted, Liam had been living and studying in Indonesia for nearly two years, whereas Rodi had been living and studying in Indonesia for nearly four years already.

As regards their experiences in learning Indonesian language, the two students maintained a very similar learning profile in that both of them neither had knowledge of nor ability to communicate in Indonesian language prior to coming to Indonesia. Still, the two students managed to develop high level of mastery in using Indonesian language in both written and oral discourse after about a year living and studying in Indonesia, i.e. as reported by the students themselves in the interview.

However, there was also a marked difference between the two students in regard to their proficiency level of English language, both before commencing their study and during studying at the university. That is, although Liam and Rodi had learned English at school back in their home country before, it was only Rodi who maintained a quite high level of mastery in English prior to commencing his study at the university. What is more, he also managed to enhance his level of proficiency in English during studying at the university as well. Liam, however, was relatively poor in English at the time he commenced his study, and his low level in English persisted up to two years as this study was conducted.

Given that the two learners only learned Indonesian language in a quite limited period of time as compared with the time they spent in learning English and yet they managed to develop their skills in Indonesian better than or as well as their English, it was assumed, therefore,

that there existed a relationship between learning contexts and learning process which further determined the learning outcomes. This study aimed to understand such situated practice. In line with the aim, this study attempted to address the following questions:

1. How did learning contexts relate to the process and outcomes of second language learning carried out by Rodi and Liam?
2. How did Rodi and Liam cope with learning two different languages in two different learning contexts?

The data used to answer the two questions were collected through interviews. The questions asked in the interviews included, amongst others, the learners' profiles, their experience and perceptions of learning Indonesian and English as well as their strategies in learning the two languages. The interviews were semi-structured in that they allowed the researchers to ask questions not listed in the interview guideline based on the participants' reports (Bryman, 2008, p. 438). The interview guideline containing the planned questions asked is attached in Appendix 1.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Based on the results of the interviews (summarised in Table 1), it is shown that there are similarities as well as differences of the learners' experiences in learning the two languages.

Table 1: Summary of the interview data

Nationality	The Philippines	Thailand
Age group	23 - 25 years old	20 - 22 years old
As the study was conducted, they were enrolled in	Semester 8 (the fourth year)	Semester 4 (the second year)
Length of studying English since elementary school	16 years	14 years
English communication skills	Very good (able to understand and produce the normal rate speech. Repetition or rephrasing was only occasionally required).	Poor (only able to understand and produce careful and simplified speech and often needed repetition or rephrasing).
Strategies of learning English	Focused on language systems,	Focused on language systems,

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	especially on grammar and vocabulary.	especially on grammar and vocabulary.
Indonesian communication skills	Very good (able to understand and produce the normal rate speech. Repetition or rephrasing was only occasionally required).	Very good (able to understand and produce the normal rate speech. Repetition or rephrasing was only occasionally required).
Strategies of learning Indonesian	Focused on use through interpersonal communication	Focused on use through interpersonal communication
Reason for learning English	As a major of study in higher education	As a major of study in higher education
Reason for learning Indonesian	As a medium of communication with the society	As a medium of communication with the society

The most striking similarity in the data is that the two learners developed their ample proficiency in Indonesian language quite shortly. Both of them reported that they were able to communicate with the people in Indonesia using Indonesian language within the first year of living in the country. The other most striking similarity is related to their experiences in learning Indonesian language, including the contexts where they usually learned Indonesian and the strategies they employed when learning the two languages. Furthermore, according to the learners the fact that they were exposed to the use of Indonesian language and were also able to practise using the language in a wide range of communication contexts make their learning easier and more successful as compared with their experiences in learning English. Thus, it is obvious that contextual factors constitute the most facilitating factor in learning a language.

With regard to learning English, however, the two learners faced different circumstances in that Rodi, the one from the Philippines whose English proficiency was very good, was highly “appreciated” by his peers when using English in and outside of the classroom and that situation encouraged him to keep on using and thus enhancing his English proficiency. On the other hand, Liam was self-conscious and timid when asked to use English and did not get enough encouragement from his peers to learn English in and outside of the classroom. These findings are further discussed below.

Discussions

Facilitating and inhibiting factors in learning a language in foreign language contexts

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As stated in the findings above, only one of the two learners managed to attain high level of proficiency in English while the other was still less proficient. One of the possible reasons to explain the different level of proficiency is related to the previous contexts of learning.

On the basis of the learners' reports, it is obvious that English is more widely used in the Philippines than it is in Thailand, both at school and in other communication contexts as well. Thus, although both learners had experienced in learning English since elementary school level before coming to Indonesia, only Rodi found it more compelling to develop his communicative skills in English back in the Philippines, whereas Liam did not find it urgent to develop his English communicative skills back in Thailand. These two different circumstances regarding the more and less compelling condition to the use of English seem to have contributed to their more and less developed proficiency in English itself. In other words, the more the learners find it compelling to be capable of communicating in the target language, the more facilitating it is to the process of learning.

The other factor which has contributed to the marked difference of the two learners' proficiency in English is related to their eagerness to use the target language in authentic communicative contexts. That is, it is shown from the results of the interviews that Rodi was more active in using English to communicate with his friends and teachers than Liam who felt much more comfortable to use Indonesian when communicating with his friends and teachers. As regards their motivation in learning English, therefore, Rodi was apparently more motivated than Liam (Macnamara, 1971, cited in Rubin, 1975, p. 43).

Rodi's activeness in using English in communication was influenced by two factors. First, the fact that he already maintained good communicative skills in English even before he started studying English in an Indonesian university had helped him not to lose face when communicating with his friends and teachers in English. Secondly, Rodi's close friends always used English to communicate with him most of the time. These two conditions might have espoused his motivation to keep on using English and thus enhanced his proficiency thereof (for more detailed discussion on this issue see Waninge, et al. 2014; Clement, et al. 1994; Dörnyei, 1990).

Question : When you talk with your friends, do you often use English?

Rodi : Yea, I do. I often talk in English with my friends . . . close friends. . . But when I talk in Indonesian, they will respond in Indonesian too. But then when they ask me back, they switch into English again.

On the other hand, Liam was immersed in a quite different situation. First, the fact that he had not developed sufficient communicative skills in English prior to arriving in Indonesia made him quite uncomfortable to use English to communicate with his friends and teachers in English. On the contrary, he found it much easier and more comfortable to communicate in Indonesian. One of the reasons is that there are similarities between one of the languages he speaks (Malay) and Indonesian language. Secondly, he also reported that most of his friends prefer communicating with him using Indonesian to using English. He stated that only one friend of his that he could practise English quite intensively.

Question : *Waktu kamu ngobrol ama temen-temen sekelas mu, biasanya menggunakan bahasa Indonesia apa bahasa Inggris?*

[When you talk with your classmates, do you usually use Indonesian or English?]

Liam : *Sering Indonesia, tapi kalau sama [menyebutkan nama temannya] kebanyakan bahasa Inggris, setiap hari juga. Kalo gak ngerti juga baru bahasa Indonesia.*

[Mostly in Indonesian, but with [mentioning the name of his friend] I mostly use English, like everyday. But when we don't understand each other then we use Indonesian].

Learning strategies of good and poor language learners in foreign language contexts

In relation to learning strategies, it is found that Rodi's learning strategies were more expeditious as compared with Liam's. Although it is true that both Rodi and Liam mostly learned English through studying the language systems, especially in regard to grammar and vocabulary, it is, however, only Rodi who deliberately learned to apply the language systems into language use.

Rodi : We have to apply both. Memorizing vocabulary and analysing grammar rules from grammar books, for example, and also . . . and also to use it. *Ndak bisa satu aja.* [We can't just deal with one of them].

On the other hand, the key factor which might have strongly related to Liam's low level of proficiency is that he was mainly concerned only with studying the language systems in a decontextualised manner and even, as he confessed, he did it quite lazily.

Question : *Kalo dalam belajar bahasa Inggris biasanya gimana?*

[How do you usually learn English?]

Liam : Grammar. *Kebanyakan itu grammar. Termasuk kalo orang pinter disana itu pinter grammar. Speaking . eh . gimana ya? Agak sedikit bisa, tapi grammar bagus. Dan menghafal kosakata juga. Tapi saya agak malas.*

[Grammar. I mostly study grammar. In my country, the smart persons are those who are good at grammar. Speaking . uh . . what should I say? Well, a little bit, but grammar must be good. I also memorise vocabulary. Though I'm quite lazy to do it].

Rodi's successful learning strategies which combined two modes of learning, i.e. attending to language systems and apply the systems into real communication, lend support to skill-development theory which claims that declarative determinant, i.e. the explicit knowledge of the language systems, can help the development of the procedural determinant, i.e. the implicit knowledge referring to the ability in using the language, more effectively. As a general reasoning, DeKeyser (2007, p.3) writes:

In most forms of skill acquisition, people are presented with *information*, e.g., . . . put a French sentence together in explicit form ("declarative knowledge"). Through initial practice they incorporate this information into *behavioral routines* ("production rules," "procedural knowledge"). This procedural knowledge consists of very specific rules and can be used fast and with a low error rate. . . . Once established, procedural knowledge can become automatized. (emphases in original).

Facilitating and inhibiting factors in learning a language in second language contexts

Despite a marked difference in terms of their level of proficiency in English, Rodi and Liam managed to develop the same level of proficiency (high level of proficiency) in using Indonesian language. From their reports, summarised in Table 1 above, it is quite obvious to see that social contexts where the language is learned constitutes a very important factor that helped both learners develop their proficiency. That is to say, the abundance of input available in the social settings helped them conceptualise the target language systems more easily and thus enable them to cope with producing output more effectively thereafter. Of course, the abundance of input available in the social setting is useless unless the learners make use of it, and such quality is what differentiates good from poor language learners (Rubin, 1975).

Being immersed in a speech community seems to also raise motivation in learning the language of the community itself. Such motivation is primarily related to survival. In other words, the two learners faced immediate needs where they had to be able to communicate with the new community where they lived in so that they were able to maintain social relationship with them and, more importantly, to fulfil their daily needs. As such, the learners perceived that learning Indonesian was meaningful and compelling. Such perception therefore might impose a great demand on the learners to be motivated to learn the language.

In other words, once the learners face the need to be able to communicate in the target language, the process of language learning will be perceived meaningful/compelling which further will raise motivation in learning the language.

However, it is also found that some culture related-factors constitute the most inhibiting factors in learning a language in second language contexts. As stated by Rodi, for instance, since there are numerous ethnic groups in Indonesia, he encountered some sorts of confusion at the earlier stage of learning Indonesian due to the lack of standard concerning how Indonesian language was articulated by different ethnic groups.

Rodi : *kesulitannya itu gini, kan biasanya ada orang Jawa . . . orang Madura. Itu kemarin juga buat bingung.*

[. . . the difficulties are like, there are Javanese . . . Madurese. It made me confused].

Different from Rodi's area of difficulty, Liam, however, found that a cultural difference constituted the one which once drove him to be quite indifferent in learning Indonesian language. As he stated,

Liam : *Tapi kemarin juga, waktu bantu itu, gak peduli gitu sama saya. Gak take care. "Gimana tugasnya?" "Ya terserah buat sendiri kamu". Gak dibantu. . . . (inaudible) Kuliah pulang, kuliah pulang, gak mau ngobrol, gak mau ngomong sama teman, gak mau.*

[But it once happened, when helping, didn't care about my concerns. Didn't take care. "How is the assignment?" "It's up to you, just do it yourself". No one helped me. . . . (inaudible) university and back home, university and back home, didn't want to talk, didn't want to talk to friends, didn't want to.

Question : *Siapa? Kamu?*

[Who? You?]

Liam : *Iya. Kok temen gak bantu gitu. Gak sama ama temen yang disana. Disana itu orang luar negeri harus banyak yang mau take care. Yang kemarin saya dipondok juga di Tailan. Sekolah saya itu ada orang luar negeri banyak. Dari Pilipin juga ada, Kamboja, Mianmar, terus apalagi? Banyak! Indonesia gak ada. Itu kalo orang luar negeri banyak dibantu. Gak ada uang dikasih.*

[Yes, why friends didn't help each other. It is not the same like friends there [in Thailand]. There, many would take care those coming from overseas. I was staying in a dorm back in Thailand. There were many students coming from overseas in my school. From the Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, where else? Many! No one from Indonesia. People from overseas would be helped. No money, we'd give it.]

Question : *Pinjam ya?*

[you mean "borrow"?]

Liam : *Gak usah pinjam. Dikasih.*

[No need to borrow. We'd give it.]

Question : *Kalo disini beda ya?*

[So, it's different here]

Liam : *Beda banget.*

[So different]

Hence, the two learners encountered different factors which once inhibited their learning of Indonesian language. While Rodi was particularly concerned with different groups of speech community, Liam was mostly concerned with the acculturation problem. Hence, it appears that only when the learners surmounted their concerns were they able to proceed learning the target language more effectively.

Learning strategies in second language learning contexts

While it is true that both of the learners mostly learned and developed their proficiency in Indonesian language by means of employing communicative strategies, Rodi, however, stated that he also benefitted from employing analytical strategy to support his capability of using the morphemes in Indonesian language. As he stated,

Rodi : For the first I was always confused when to use this *me-*, *be-*. You know, morphemes.

Question : So, how did you learn them?

Rodi : I checked in Google. I typed the description for affixes in Bahasa Indonesia. That's it, and I tried to learn [them]. *Penggunaannya. Dan dari situ aku paham dan bisa menggunakannya.*
[Their use. I then understood and could use them in communication]

The fact that Rodi found it fruitful to compensate his lack of knowledge of a particular language system of Indonesian with explicit study lend support to the studies which have found that even in an immersion language program where there is ample input to the target language, there is still a need for the learners to focus on the language systems if they are to develop high level of accuracy and thus proficiency in the target language (Swain, 1985; Lapkin, et al., 1991), especially when the target language and the learners' first language are far different from each other.

Different from Rodi's strategy, however, Liam learned Indonesian only through communication. The differences between Rodi's and Liam's strategies might be related to Liam's first language background in that since there are similarities between Malay, i.e. one of the languages he spoke, and Indonesian, the language he learned, he therefore found it

unnecessary to study grammar of Indonesian language to be able to use it in a wide range of communicative contexts.

Conclusion

On the basis of the findings and the discussion, it is concluded that learning contexts play a very important role in learning a language. Still, it is not to say that the roles of other factors, such as aptitude, age and motivation, etc., are less influential in contributing to the success of second language learning. Rather, it argues that learning contexts are also of great significance in contributing to the degree of success in learning a second language.

As far as foreign language learning is concerned, the activeness of the learners is vital. That is, only those who are willing to practise using the target language extensively are likely to attain high proficiency in it. In relation to practice, it is confirmed that in both second and foreign language learning, applying both communicative and analytical learning strategies can support the attainment of high level of proficiency more effectively, although the extent to which the learners engage in doing analytical learning strategies differs between the contexts of second and foreign language learning.

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Appendix 1. The interview guideline

This interview DOES NOT aim to assess your knowledge or skills. It is only a part of a research project which aims to understand the process of learning a second language that you have been doing. Your identity will be kept confidential.

Name :
Gender :

Warm-up questions

1. Do you mind telling me how old you are?
2. How long have you been learning English and Indonesia?
3. Do you remember when you first came to Indonesia?

Start-up questions

4. How do you usually learn English?
5. And how do you learn Indonesian?
6. Do you find it necessary to learn grammar when you learn English? Can you tell me why?
7. What about when you learn Indonesian? Do you also find it (un)necessary? Why?

Core questions specifically related to learning English

8. Do you find anything you don't like when learning English in the classroom? Can you tell me what it is? Why does it trouble you? What do you usually do then?
9. Why did you choose to major in English?

Core questions specifically related to learning Indonesian

10. Have ever encountered any problems when learning Indonesian? Can you tell me what it is? Why does it trouble you? What do you usually do then?
11. If you don't, can you tell me your experiences when you first talked with Indonesians using Indonesian language?

Concluding questions

12. Since you major in English, do you find any differences when you talked with your friends in English outside the class?
13. Can you tell me the differences that you find/feel?

Closing

OK. Thank you for your participation in this study. We really appreciate your responses and participation in this interview. We will contact you again later. Thank you very much.