

EFL STUDENTS' JOURNEY IN NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING COUNTRY: A CASE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL CREDIT TRANSFER PROGRAM IN TAIWAN

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Abstract: This article aims to explore the perceptions of EFL students after participating in an international credit transfer program in a non-English speaking country, Taiwan. The research employs a qualitative design and case study approach. The participants in this study are three English language students from a private university in Malang who attended the international credit transfer program in Taiwan for one semester. The findings of this study reveal various student perceptions regarding learning English in a non-English speaking country, including the challenges faced by EFL students upon their initial arrival in the country, the role of a foreign environment in the language learning process, and the influences on EFL learner's English proficiency. These findings provide insights into how student perceptions and learning experiences in a foreign environment can influence students' language skills.

Key Words: EFL Students, Non-English Speaking Country, Foreign Environment

INTRODUCTION

As one of the international languages with a significant role and high demand, EFL learners and educational institutions implement various strategies to provide instruction and enhance proficiency in English. The existence of an English-speaking proficiency enhancement program is important to implement so that students can use English productively (Kurniasih, Rahmati, Umamah & Widowati, 2019). Student exchange programs and studying abroad also have benefits for students in English proficiency for participating students. In mastering a language, individuals can actively participate in classroom lessons or gain exposure to the target language (Alhadad, Mustofa, & Karimullah, 2021). During the international student exchange program, students consistently communicate and write in English, providing more opportunities to practice and explore their proficiency (Suryanto, Ayuza, & Othman, 2022).

According to Vygotsky (1934), knowledge is constructed through social interactions with others and the surrounding environment. Vygotsky describes that an individual's development is influenced by social factors such as language, culture, and social interaction

(Hidayati, et al., 2023). Piaget (1926) believed that learning is a process of self-discovery, a process experienced by an individual through interaction and observation of the environment. Piaget believed that individuals learn and construct their knowledge. This theory is known as the constructivist theory. Constructivist theory is an approach to learning that emphasizes that knowledge is built by individuals through their interaction with the environment and experiences (Hidayati, et al., 2023).

Bandura (1977) in Social Learning Theory highlighted the importance of observation and social interaction in the individual learning process. In an educational context, this theory suggests that individuals learn not only through direct instruction or personal experience but also by observing the behavior of others around them, especially models they perceive as authorities or hold in high regard. While participating in the international credit transfer program, students are exposed to target languages through language classes and daily activities. Indirectly, learners will consistently be exposed to the language through listening to both teacher and classmates' conversations, enabling them to become accustomed to the vocabulary, speech patterns, accent, and intonation of the target language.

In line with Stephen Krashen's Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, language acquisition occurs naturally or unconsciously through real interaction between the learner and the environment using the target language (Nasuha, 2020). The formulation of the target language method is carried out and internalized unconsciously, similar to first language acquisition in children, which emphasizes conveying meaning rather than focusing on grammatical rules. Bahrudin and Febriani (2020) demonstrate that, according to Krashen's theory, a foreign language can be acquired similarly to a first language with the support of several factors, such as a language-rich environment and other language activities like language programs and daily conversations outside the classroom.

Krashen (1982) developed five main hypotheses in second language acquisition. The first in the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, Krashen argued that acquisition is more effective than learning in achieving language fluency. According to him, language learning that focuses too much on grammar and explicit correction can hinder the learner's natural ability to acquire the language. Therefore, Krashen suggests that second language teaching methods should emphasize acquisition through exposure to comprehensible input and meaningful interaction. Monitor Hypothesis showed that conscious language learning functions as a mechanism to monitor and correct language production that has been acquired naturally. However, this monitor is only effective under certain conditions: the learner has enough time, focuses on the form of the language, and knows the relevant grammatical rules.

Krashen in the Input Hypothesis indicated that exposure to comprehensible input is the main key in language learning. In unfamiliar environments, students need to seek out or create situations in which they can receive input that is slightly above their competency level. Affective Filter Hypothesis showed that emotional factors play a significant role in second language acquisition. Understanding and managing these factors can enhance the effectiveness of language teaching and help students learn a second language more effectively. The Natural Order Hypothesis indicated that second language learners tend to acquire grammatical structures in a predictable and fixed order. This order occurs naturally and cannot be fully controlled by formal teaching methods. Therefore, effective language instruction should take this natural order into account and provide comprehensible input that matches the learner's stage of acquisition.

Swain (1985) argued that language production (output) is as important as language reception (input) for the development of language abilities. This active engagement through output allows learners to experiment with language forms, receive feedback, and refine their linguistic skills. Additionally, producing language helps in reinforcing memory and understanding of language rules, making the learning process more effective. Through continuous practice and application, students can achieve greater fluency and accuracy, ultimately leading to more proficient language use.

In implementing strategies to enhance English proficiency through the international student exchange program, students are immersed in an environment where the target language is prevalent. They are surrounded by the target language in various settings, including the school environment and daily activities. This approach emphasizes using the target language as the primary means of communication, with little or no use of the native language. The continuous language exposure students receive through assignments, activities, and various extracurricular events tends to be more successful due to active engagement from each student (Masitoh, Degaf, & Huda, 2023). Practicing speaking in the target language daily can help students improve their speaking skills (Astuti, Umamah, & Sholihah, 2020). In speaking or communicating verbally, language plays an active role, where good use of language in communication can provide a good understanding in conveying messages (Nasih, Yunus & Rahmawati, 2019).

In the interaction hypothesis, Long (1981) states that interaction and negotiation of meaning are very important for language learning. In a foreign environment, the opportunity to interact with other students is invaluable for feedback and language clarification. In addition, Wenger's (1991) in Communities of Practice theory emphasizes that learning occurs

through participation in communities of shared practice and identity. In foreign environments, learners can join online or local communities that use the target language to expand their opportunities to practice and learn (Wibowo, 2012).

The most effective English learning occurs in countries where English is the primary language, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Studying English in these countries is considered the best method, providing learners with an ideal learning context. Students will have native-speaker teachers and numerous opportunities to practice outside the classroom. In contrast, countries where English is a second language are considered less ideal for learning English due to limited access to authentic materials and a shortage of native English-speaking teachers. The least ideal context is when students learn English in non-English speaking countries. English is considered a foreign language and is only taught in schools without being used in everyday conversation. This usually occurs when students study English in countries where English is regarded as a foreign language (Wirantaka & Mardiningrum, 2023).

Studies on how EFL students learn English in non-English speaking countries are relatively rare. In this study, the research takes place in a different country with a different culture, as well as the programs attended with a different duration than previous studies. From this study, the writer wants to investigate the EFL learners' perception of language learning in a non-English speaking country when following the international credit transfer program in Taiwan for one semester. Therefore, this research is conducted to reveal “What are students' perceptions regarding learning English in non-English speaking country?”.

METHOD

To achieve the objectives aligned with the initial research goal of understanding the perceptions of EFL students studying in non-English speaking countries, as well as the benefits and obstacles they encounter, this study employs a case study research design. This approach emphasizes understanding and exploring the perspectives of participants and introducing their personal experiences (Creswell, 2003). Through this approach, it is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of the studied case. The research utilizes a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews to gain insights into the experiences and perceived benefits of the participants.

In this study, the author engaged three sixth-semester students from the English Education program at a private university in Malang who participated in an international credit transfer program for one semester at National Pingtung University. The three

participants were chosen based on the author's criteria, as during their participation in the program, students take part in English-language teaching and learning activities in non-English-speaking country, and learn the local language of the country. The three informants expressed their willingness to participate as participants in this research through WhatsApp messages while they were in Taiwan for the international credit transfer program. They also agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews after completing the program and returning to Indonesia. In this study, the names of the three students mentioned are pseudonyms.

In this research, data source comes from interviews between the author and participants. In-depth interviews were conducted with the three selected students from the English Education program. These interviews aimed to capture their perceptions, experiences, and insights related to the language learning encountered during their semester-long international credit transfer program at National Pingtung University.

In the process of data collecting, the author uses semi-structured interviews with participants' experiences tailored to the writer's intent and purpose in conducting research (Yulianti & Mukminin, 2021). The instrument used to collect the data of the research was interview questions adapted from Wirantaka and Mardiningrum (2023), which involved questions about the EFL learners' perception and experiences in learning English in non-English speaking country. These questions consist of 10 questions covering the problems faced while learning English in non-native English speaker countries, the solutions implemented, the impacts felt, and their opinions regarding the program. The interview guidelines are used to guide researchers in conducting the interview, with a duration of 30 minutes per person.

During the interview process, the author recorded the conversation for later analysis and that they can be played back during the analysis process, to minimize errors and as evidence from the interview. The researcher used Indonesian when asking questions, and invited the participants to use Indonesian when giving answers and telling about their experiences to give the freedom to convey their experiences without worrying about errors in language use, as well as to minimize misunderstandings in receiving information. The author used the WhatsApp application as a communication tool between the author and the participants to anticipate parts of the interview that are unclear. The time used in the interview process is adjusted to the opportunity and time availability of each participant.

After the data collection was carried out, the data analysis comprised several steps. First, the author carefully analyzed the interviews of the three participants. The author begins to copy the results of the interviews and then reads them repeatedly to get a clear

understanding of the research purpose. The author takes the points from the results of the interviews that have been conducted (Abrar, 2019). Then, to ensure the accuracy of the transcript that has been created, the author provided the results to the three participants. The next step is to code the data based on the predetermined themes.

To ensure trust and verify the results of the interview data that has been conducted, the authors involve participants by providing the results of the transcripts that have been made to minimize interpretations of the results of the report and obtain feedback and comments from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the conducted interviews indicate the EFL learner's perception of learning English in a non-English speaking country which is divided into three discussion themes based on the results of data analysis that has been carried out, including the challenges faced by EFL students upon their initial arrival in the country, the role of a foreign environment in the language learning process and the influences on EFL learners English proficiency. The challenges faced by EFL students are differences in English accents used in conversations. Additionally, the interview results also show the role of foreign environments in the language learning process, such as the consistent use of English in conversations with fellow students from different countries. This research indicates the influences on the English proficiency of the three students after returning from the program.

1. Cultural Differences

The first finding indicates that the three students faced challenges during the initial period of their arrival in Taiwan to participate in the international credit transfer program. The challenges encountered include cultural differences in terms of their native language. These include language differences in communication, variations in English accents influenced by differences in native languages, and not everyone in the local community can speak English well.

Fajar shared his experience about the difficulties he faced when he first started participating in classroom activities due to the different accents used. In this regard Fajar stated,

The challenge I faced was the difference in accents used when trying to understand what the lecturers were saying. If I didn't fully understand what was being communicated, it could lead to misunderstandings and falling behind in the course material.

Similarly, Lia expressed the difficulties she felt when she first started attending classes. She said,

In attending classes, I initially had difficulty adapting to the difference in accents, but for me, this did not affect my learning experience.

In this case, the two students encountered some difficulties related to the cultural differences between their home countries and the country where they studied during their participation in the international credit transfer program for one semester. However, the difficulties they faced were overcome after some time, and they successfully adapted. These difficulties did not hinder them from continuing to participate actively in their studies. Instead, the cultural differences they encountered became learning opportunities and new knowledge for the three students. The finding of this study is correlated with Furnham and Bochner (1970) that culture shock occurs when individuals are unfamiliar with the social customs of a new culture, or even if they are aware of them, they may not be able or willing to behave according to those customs. This happens due to significant cultural differences between the student's home country and the country where they are studying. Barna (1994) identifies several factors that hinder intercultural communication, including language differences, nonverbal misinterpretations, stereotypes and prejudices, tendencies to judge or evaluate, and high anxiety.

2. Foreign Environment

This section highlights the interview results regarding their experiences while studying English in a non-English speaking country and the habits they developed while improving their English skills. In the language learning process, the foreign environment around them played a significant role in their language acquisition through daily practice of speaking and listening to conversations in English.

Fajar shared his experience when faced with a foreign environment that required him to continue communicating in English during conversations. Fajar stated,

In my opinion, the key to learning English is communication, and I personally become more enthusiastic, especially when communicating with foreigners because there are no negative thoughts like being perceived as pretentious for using English, and so on. With a foreign conversation partner, I feel that it is no longer a matter of whether I want to speak English or not, but that I indeed have to speak English.

Via expressed the same sentiment as Fajar when faced with a foreign environment that required her to communicate in English all the time. In this regard, Via said,

An environment that truly supports continuous practice in speaking at all times, even when exchanging messages.

A similar opinion was expressed by Lia, who felt that there was no other choice but to continue communicating in English so that her peers from different countries could understand what she was saying. This was conveyed in an interview where Lia said,

While there, I had no choice but to think and find out for myself how to speak in English and use the grammar correctly because if it weren't accurate, they wouldn't understand what I was trying to say. In my opinion, even though I am learning English in a non-English speaking country, I still get many opportunities to keep learning, exploring, and practicing my English.

In this case, the three students shared their experiences of being in a foreign environment that required them to adapt and continuously practice their English skills while communicating, both with classmates and lecturers in the classroom. While in the foreign environment, the students were required to be critical and independent in finding out the meaning of sentences they did not understand, as well as using correct grammar to ensure effective communication with those around them. Their experiences in the foreign environment were very different from the environment they usually faced in Indonesia, where they could still communicate using their mother tongue, Indonesian. This aligns with the sociocultural theory developed by psychologist Vygotsky (1934), which asserts that social interaction and cultural context are pivotal in cognitive development and learning. According to this theory, knowledge is constructed through social interactions with others and the surrounding environment, influencing language, culture, and social interactions. Furthermore, this is related to the Constructivist theory by Piaget (1926), which posits that individuals build knowledge through their interactions with the environment and experiences. Additionally, Long (1981) in the interaction hypothesis emphasizes the importance of interaction and negotiation of meaning in language learning. According to Khalidah, Ni'mah, and Ismiatun (2023), there are several strategies used by high-proficient students to enhance their English speaking skills, including the use of memory and social strategies.

3. Influence on Language Skill

This section presents the opinions of the three students regarding the impact they felt after participating in language learning activities in a non-English speaking country and their views on English language learning programs in such countries. In this case, the three students expressed the same opinion about the impact they felt after undergoing a semester-long language learning program in a non-English speaking country, where all three felt more confident in speaking English, and their speaking and listening skills improved compared to before they joined the program.

Fajar expressed his opinion regarding the differences he noticed in his English language skills after returning from Taiwan, where he participated in the international credit transfer program. Fajar said,

Because I am used to speaking and listening in English, when someone speaks in English, it feels more familiar and easier to understand. In fact, if someone talks, sometimes I reflexively respond in English.

In addition, another effect was felt by Via, who, in an interview, expressed her feelings about her English language skills, which she felt had improved. Via stated,

I feel there is an improvement in my English skills because I use English in conversations every day.

Similarly to what the other two students mentioned, Lia also expressed the impact she felt on her English language skills. Lia stated,

It feels like my tongue is more accustomed to speaking in English, because back in Indonesia, when I tried to speak in English, there was a lot of joking around, hesitation, and embarrassment. But there, I had no choice but to think and find out for myself how to speak in English and use the grammar correctly while talking.

In this excerpt from the interview, the three students expressed the differences they noticed in their English language abilities. They all felt more accustomed to speaking in English and found it easier to understand English conversations. They attributed this to the foreign environment around them, which required them to constantly speak in English. During the program, the three students were immersed in a foreign environment with peers and instructors from other countries who could not communicate in Indonesian. As a result, they had to continually communicate in English, even when exchanging messages. Additionally, the three students agreed that the program they participated in was very worthwhile and provided many benefits and experiences, even though it took place in a non-English speaking country. This aligns with Krashen's (1981) second language acquisition theory, which posits that language can be acquired naturally, similar to the acquisition of a first language, through interaction between students and their environment. Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis further stated that exposure to comprehensible input is key to language learning. The continuous exposure students receive from their surrounding environment influences their English language proficiency. Swain (1985) argued that language production (output) is as crucial as language reception (input) for developing language skills.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This research examines students' experiences and perceptions in learning English in non-native English-speaking country. The study's findings indicate that students face various initial challenges, particularly in adapting to differences in accent and culture. These factors often lead to difficulties in understanding and communicating effectively during the early stages of learning, given that accent differences can influence both listening comprehension and language production.

Furthermore, this research also demonstrates that the foreign environment factor is crucial in encouraging students to practice communicating in English continuously. The environment that demands constant use of English both inside and outside the classroom compels students to apply their language skills in real-life situations. Being immersed in a foreign environment that requires daily English communication has a significantly positive impact on their language proficiency. This sustained practice accelerates the learning process and enables students to improve their English language skills more quickly and efficiently. Specifically, they become more fluent in speaking, better at understanding different accents, and more capable of adapting to various communication contexts.

Therefore, despite initial barriers, the pressure to continuously use English in daily life environments provides significant benefits for students' mastery of the English language, even in non-English speaking countries. This research underscores the importance of immersion and sustained practice in learning a foreign language, as well as the need for additional support to help students overcome initial challenges in language and cultural adaptation. These findings offer valuable insights for educational institutions and language instructors in designing effective learning programs for students.

Based on the findings of the research on EFL students' experiences in non-English speaking countries, it is expected to provide valuable insights for educational institutions and language instructors in designing programs to enhance English language proficiency. This research should also serve as a consideration in designing appropriate and effective curricula and creating a conducive learning environment in local educational institutions, such as incorporating language extracurricular activities and emphasizing daily language practice.

Additionally, this research can be an important consideration for students in choosing and participating in similar programs, allowing them to maximize the benefits of learning English in non-English speaking countries. Furthermore, different research methods can be utilized to gain more detailed insights into the benefits of learning English in non-English

speaking countries by measuring the specific levels of English language proficiency development for future research.

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