

Exploring the Dynamic Interplay of Personality, Language Learning Strategies, and Environment in Indonesian EFL Learners' Success

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Abstract: Indonesian EFL learners are diverse in personalities, choices of language learning strategies (LLSs), learning environments, and many others, which may influence their success in EFL learning and performance. Considering the diversities, two elementary school students (ESSs) studying at a private Islamic elementary school (PIES) surpassed other participants from many schools in some English Olympiads around East Java, Indonesia. Hence, the present study was aimed at delving into the stories of two successful EFL learners in an Islamic elementary school in Bojonegoro, East Java, Indonesia. To gather the data, documentation on the participants' achievements artifacts (i.e., certificates, trophies, and medals) and semi-structured interviews to dig deeper into their EFL learning strategies to achieve success were conducted. The participants were requested to read the article draft to validate the data. Prior to the data gathering, both participants signed a letter of consent. The results revealed that each possessed distinct personalities that influenced their choices of EFL LLSs. These LLSs were boosted by the family and learning environment motifs, which further brought them to participate in and win the English Olympiads. Henceforth, it urges surroundings to aid ESSs in understanding their personalities, accommodates their LLSs, and provides a motivating environment.

Keywords: EFL learners, elementary school students, learners' personalities, learning environment, learning strategies

1. Introduction

Many factors influence the success of EFL learners. Pariyanto and Pradipta (2020) stated that three factors affected EFL learners' success in learning. They should possess the internal motivation to sustain their learning efforts, own positive and supportive environments, and have a positive attitude toward English. Cabrera-Solano Gonzalez-Torres, Solano, Castillo-Cuesta and Jiménez (2019) strengthened the importance of internal motivation to exist to minimize anxiety during English learning. This motivation would maintain learners' persistence in learning and finding best-suited learning strategies that were suitable to their learning situations.

To be more comprehensive, Renandya (2013) set the abbreviation of the factors into FLAMINGOS, which comprises fluency, lexis, amount and intensity, motivation, input, grammar, output, and set expressions. The FLAMINGOS framework requested educators and the environment to provide support. By reflecting on the discussed studies, various factors may affect EFL learners differently in different learning contexts. The curriculum and lesson planning should be developed and evaluated to meet these differences to boost each EFL learner's learning potential (Reis and Renzulli 2018). Therefore, the study of individual differences should be considered (Felder and Brent 2005). The EFL learners' differences that come into discussion popularity are learners' personalities (Nguyen and Terry 2017), language learning strategies (LLSs) (Bhandari 2022), and learning environment (Getie 2020).

The individual EFL learner's differences can be in the form of personality types. Each EFL learner may have a different personality that affects EFL learning achievement (Abdorezza, Hoda and Fatemeh 2015; Marpaung and Widiyanotero 2020). According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), personalities include behavior, attitude, belief, thoughts, feelings, and actions that are distinctive and recognizable. The personalities are classified into four dimensions: introvert/extrovert, feeling/thinking, sensing/intuitive, and perceiving/judging (Chih-Kang and Hong-Shan 2010). Some previous studies unveil the relationship between personalities and learning achievement. Some studies (Maniruzzaman and Aktar 2010; Suliman 2014; Khoiriyah 2016) mentioned that extrovert EFL learners achieved better than introverted learners. Marpaung and Widiyanotero (2020) stated that positive feelings and perceptions of EFL learners toward the EFL learning input had a high correlation with their achievement. Sometimes, EFL learners should successfully break the negative perceptions that reduce their learning progression (Al-Munawarrah 2018). Therefore, understanding EFL learners' personalities can help them manage the best learning strategies to learn English better.

Pietrzykowska (2014) highlights the relationship between EFL learners' language learning strategies (LLSs) and English well performance. Nguyen and Terry (2017) noticed that EFL learners could benefit from the LLS application if they found themselves suitable with the chosen strategies. Oxford (1990) explained that EFL learners should be equipped with one or both direct and indirect LLSs. The direct LLSs are memory strategy, cognitive strategy, and compensation strategy. The Indirect LLSs consist of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Moreover, their study mentioned that LLSs would only successfully help EFL learners achieve better proficiency with the support of factors affecting EFL learning success, such as an interest in English, an aptitude for language learning, effort investment in learning, or determination. Hidayati, Hadijah, Masyhur and Nurhaedin (2022) said that a combination of EFL learner's good self-resilient and self-appropriate LLSs could leverage both their receptive and productive EFL skills achievement. Then, Sadriyeva's (2021) study showed that extrovert learners had different LLS preferences than introverts. This study suggested further

investigation to unveil the relationship between EFL learners' personalities and their chosen LLSs, which leads to successful learning.

Discussing the success of EFL learners, especially at the elementary school level, two students from an Indonesia suburban elementary school situated in Bojonegoro city, East Java, Indonesia, and living together as siblings evidenced EFL learning success. They achieved many awards in some English Olympiads around East Java, Indonesia. They surpassed many participants coming from various elementary schools in Indonesia. Based on the observation and interview with their mother, they have different personality types. They studied in a private Islamic elementary school in a suburban area with no particular English learning program other than one half-hour weekly English lesson. They admitted that the only EFL learning source is their English lesson in school. However, Abdul-Ghafour, Mohammed and Alrefaee (2019) and Mulyani (2020) found that learning frequency and duration affected EFL learning success. Henceforth, unveiling stories underlying the siblings' success in EFL learning can illuminate the other EFL learners and fill the existing studies' gaps.

2. Methodology

The present study's focus was to conduct a narrative inquiry in which the narrative data were collected from EFL learning experiences in the context of an Indonesian suburban elementary school. Following this goal, according to Creswell (2013), the narrative inquiry design with a multi-case study model seemed appropriate to depict human experience, capture, and describe the human experience through stories (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007), i.e., the details of the EFL students' experiences. So, a narrative inquiry design is utilized as a research approach to investigate one's lived experience (Clandinin and Connelly 2016) in order to comprehend one's lived realities and the social settings in which they were (re)constructed. The current study's approach allows it to closely examine participants' construction EFL learning path to success through their lived experiences of learning and using English as influenced and shaped by social, cultural, and political discourses in which they conducted their English learning duties.

2.1 Participants

Two elementary school students (ESSs) who were studying at the same private Islamic elementary school (PIES) were purposely chosen to join the present study. In selecting the participants, the researcher considered their achievements surpassed other participants from many schools in some English Olympiads around East Java, Indonesia. In addition, the selection of participants was also based on the participant's willingness to join this research. The two signed and returned the letter of consent form prior to the data collection process being conducted. The two participants were Karina and Tania (pseudonyms). Karina, a 12 years old female ESS, had won eleven English Olympiads around East Java, Indonesia. She was six graders when this research was conducted. Another participant was Tania, a nine years old female ESS or third-grader student who had won five English Olympiads

around East Java, Indonesia. Their achievements are pictured in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4.



Figure 1. Collections of certificates, trophies, and medals



Figure 2. Tania's photo as the 1st winner in the English Olympic



Figure 3. Karina's photo as the 3rd winner in the English Olympic



Figure 4. Karina's photo as the 3rd winner in the English Olympic

2.2 Data collection

In order to collect the data, an in-depth interview was conducted. The focus of the interview was digging stories related to the participants' EFL learning experience at school, the participant's comments on the other participant personality, the participants' attempts to learn English to win the English Olympiads, and the participants' motivation in learning English and winning the English Olympiads. The interview was conducted in 20-25 minutes and in Bahasa Indonesia to maintain the participants' comfort. The interview process was recorded using a handphone recording app. In addition, the note-taking process was done to help the researcher to comprehend the context of stories during the interview (Polkinghorne 2005).

2.3 Data analysis and trustworthiness

The data analysis was started by transcribing the interview result and reading and re-reading the transcription. Following this step, the cross-case analysis technique was applied to minimize complexities and organize the stories based on varieties and similarities in the form of themes and subthemes. Finally, the findings were discussed with the theories and existing literature.

The trustworthiness of this research was achieved by including the participants in the process of transcription, retelling the stories, and analysis to verify and obtain feedback (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Clandinin and Connelly (2016) suggested the mentioned process to negotiate anonymity, ethical issues, and boundaries with the research participants as part of relational responsibility.

3. Findings

The findings of this study would contain the retelling of the participants' stories regarding their personalities, the language learning strategies (LLSs) they applied, and the environment where they applied the LLSs for EFL learning. The story of each participant was told thematically and separately.

3.1 Karina's story

Karina was a sixth grader in a private Islamic elementary school (PIES) who had studied English as a subject in school for eight years. She started to learn English vocabulary when she was in kindergarten. She has yet to join a supplementary course to boost her English proficiency. Her teacher taught her in school based on the teacher's book provided by the Ministry of Education of Indonesia. Her English proficiency could have been more satisfactory as she might understand the English materials she learned in class. However, she needed help figuring out how and when to apply it.

a. Personality

Assessing her personality, Karina considers herself an extrovert person. She could mingle with classmates and normally communicate socially without any obstacles. Her open personality put her in a girl squad and helped her to get her friends' attention.

'... I like to make friends, and I have a girl squad in my classroom. My squad always follows my order, and we support each other.'

'I do not want to be late for any school program, and I want to be the best.'

The above excerpt shows that she also thought she was a disciplined student with the evidence that she was never late to school, always punctual in submitting the homework, and upset at any school program she missed. Moreover, she clearly stated that she wanted to be the best in her class in all subjects, including English. So, she depicted high motivation that lifted her self-determination to achieve desirable competence. However, her positive personality contradicted her belief in her EFL learning achievement.

Karina showed a competitive personality since she wanted to be the best among her classmates.

'I was sad when I found a friend learning English from my other friend, whom I knew that she was not smarter than me. Why? He should ask my help to teach him the subject. For me, English is interesting to learn.'

She was a competitive EFL learner, and she believed that she was the best at all subjects, including English. This statement depicted contradiction and a

personality shift from acknowledging herself as low in English proficiency at the beginning but shifted to confident English proficiency when her proficiency was compared to others.

b. Language learning strategy

Based on the interview transcript, Karina said that she struggled to memorize all the vocabulary she learned in class. Possessing many vocabularies helped her to understand the questions in the school test.

‘My English teacher usually asks students to answer questions in the textbook. She sometimes asks the students to find the meaning of words, or the teachers ask us to write the vocabulary with their meaning. I got a good score on the vocabulary test because I was diligent in memorizing it.’

When the school principal offered her to join the English Olympiads, she mentioned that she did not have a special program or course she joined as preparation. She just learned English from the textbook and re-learned her notes. Her intention to manage EFL learning before the English Olympiads reflects her choice of LLS, which was the metacognitive strategy.

c. Learning environment

Both participants studied in the same school and lived with the same parents as family members. Karina's parents were businessmen and were busy with the company workload. They gave Karina tremendous opportunities to manage her learning without continuously and daily reminding her to learn the school subject prior to the schedules. However, Karina admitted that her mother insisted her be the best in the school. Her mother would get angry if Karina's academic performance showed declining. Due to this external motivation, Karina did not want to make her mother sad and always re-learn the English materials she learned at school before attending the Olympiads. She found that her mother looked supportive and happy to see her learning before the competition.

‘My mother demands me to be the best in the class since she was also the best in her school times.’

The school where Karina was studying was also supportive by providing a teacher to assist Karina during the competition day. No particular program was being prepared to equip Karina with better English proficiency to tackle the obstacles of the English Olympiads. Then, her classmates showed more pride in being her friends after her achievement in the English competition. Karina's confidence raised, and she obtained more enthusiasm to achieve more achievements.

3.2 Tania's story

Like Karina, Tania studied in a private Islamic elementary school (PIES) in a rural area in Bojonegoro suburban, East Java, Indonesia. Tania also started to learn English when she was in kindergarten. When she became the participant in this research, she was in the third grade of elementary school. Her teacher taught

English, similar to how Karina's teacher taught English subject. Based on her response regarding her English proficiency level, she thought she just tried to enjoy the English subject. She needed to be more clearly interested in English but had to learn it since it was compulsory. She just wanted to get a score from her teacher.

a. Personality

Tania saw herself as introverted and did not mingle a lot with her classmates. She was reluctant to keep in touch non-virtually since some of her classmates bullied her physically verbally.

‘I feel better being alone in school because my classmates and seniors usually say bad words about my physical condition. I had never got mad at my classmates and cried at home because of my classmates' bullying.’

The inconducive learning environment at school decreased Tania's motivation to go to school, and she complained about it to her mother. Her mother motivated her and consulted Tania's situation with the school teacher. After a few days, Tania returned to school, and her inferior feeling appeared to be not confident performance.

‘Mam, your daughter needs your support to be more cheerful and improve her learning performance.’

Tania mentioned that the bullying had been happening until she joined this research. However, the frequencies were fewer recently. Because of this situation, Tania became a deep thinker and frequently hesitated to make decisions. Similarly, when Tania was at home, she preferred to stay alone in an area and be silent for a long time. On the other hand, her belief in being independent and non-sociable had increased, which enabled her to enjoy her life more.

b. Language learning strategy

Tania's personality influenced her language learning strategies (LLS) choice. Being independent (or alone) in school directed her to apply the memory strategy. She knew she was not as bright as her sister Karina, but she wanted to try to be like her older sister.

‘My sister is a smart student, and I am not as smart as her. In my opinion, she gets many friends because she is smart. So, I try to memorize what my teacher has explained.’

Compared with her older sister's learning habit, her sister showed a metacognitive strategy which was reflected by Karina's discipline to re-learn what she learned at school. On the other hand, Tania did not show regularity in a self-regulated learning schedule at home. She mentioned that she does not enjoy English subjects, and her teacher usually lets students work with students' English subject workbooks (LKS). She just read her book at the time when the school examination schedule approached, or she was asked to join the English Olympiads.

Based on the researcher's observation and conducting an unplanned interview, the researcher found that Tania enjoyed watching anime game tutorials on YouTube.com. She wanted to make such an anime video based on her

imagination. She also asked the researcher to enjoy the short video she made, which raised her curiosity to know whether this habit affected her in EFL learning.

‘I enjoy creating anime videos using this application, and I am unsure if it increased my English score. Nevertheless, I know the meaning of vocabulary and sentences in the test, similar to what I find on YouTube.’

The researcher further observed Tania's habits at home, and he found that Tania used most of her time playing with her gadget to watch various anime and gameplay videos. She was interested in teen anime and gameplay videos of the game she was currently playing. She showed that she was open to this type of English exposure to enrich her English proficiency, meaning that she applied an indirect strategy (the affective strategy). She compensated the formal EFL learning situation into subconscious learning through anime watching and creating (compensation strategy application).

c. Learning environment

Tania studied in the same school as Karina, but Tania experienced the learning environment differently. The bullying acts that her classmates did hinder her potential, which made her a passive and silent learner in the class. She never succeeded in EFL learning unless her school offered her to join the English Olympiads. Luckily, she won her first English competition, and she claimed to find more confidence in meeting her classmates.

‘Do you know, I felt happy and proud of myself. I could tell my classmates that I was better at English than them.’

She needed to figure out her English proficiency to help her successfully win the Olympiads. However, her parents' support by assisting her in going to the place where the competition was held insisted her to keep going and try her best. However, her parents had never assisted her in studying since they were busy with their business.

4. Discussion

The discussion of the present study was developed based on the findings and theories from previous studies. The discussion was presented following the thematic patterns presented in the findings, which contained the result of cross-case analysis (Creswell 2013).

4.1 Participants' personalities and successful EFL learning

Different EFL learners perceive EFL learning differently. Some said that English is the most challenging subject to learn (Panggabean 2014), while others said that English is an exciting subject for elementary school students (Komara and Tiarsiwi 2021). Their EFL learning success in and outside the English classroom may affect their perceptions of English. Both participants perceived English differently before and after joining the English Olympiads. Karina perceived similarly that the English subject was interesting since she should be the best in the English class. Her interest in being the top achiever in class, which she could grab in reality,

opened her optimism to her classmates. She could express her feelings, responses, and reactions toward any English input she received in school. These relieving situations, which supported her extroversion personality, opened more joy for Karina to boost her EFL learning achievement (Maniruzzaman and Aktar 2010; Suliman 2014; Khoiriyah 2016). Proudly, she could win many English Olympiads held in various cities in East Java, Indonesia

On the other side, Tania hardly developed an interest in learning English. She thought English was difficult and needed help figuring out how to apply her English competence. Wirza's (2018) study stated that inappropriate EFL learner identity development would lead the learners to learning difficulties. So, in the present study, Tania unveiled the truth that she could shift her initial identity from pessimistic to optimistic EFL learners with the support of her learning motifs. Her motifs to achieve success in learning English were her parents' ambition and showing her self-esteem among classmates. These motifs broke her EFL learning barrier to thinking that she must conquer English (Al-Munawarrah 2018; Cabrera-Solano et al. 2019). Tania's first success in English Olympiads had successfully minimized her introverted personality into better confidence. This confidence also reduced her earlier belief in considering English as an unexciting subject.

Comparing these two participants' personality differences, one was extrovert, and the other was introverted, but both succeeded in the English Olympiads. It proved that personalities did not merely affect EFL learners' learning success and that their personality did not directly influence learning success (Marpaung and Widiyanotoro 2020; Sadriyeva 2021). Some other factors, such as motivation and learning environment, could contribute to success.

4.2 Participants' LLSs and successful EFL learning

According to some studies, applying language learning strategies (LLSs) can contribute to the success of EFL learners in learning English (Pietrzykowska 2014; Nguyen and Terry 2017; Bhandari 2022). Karina and Tania applied memory strategies that reflect conventional LLSs and are suitable with their teacher's teaching model, which focused more on vocabulary and translation. However, Karina had a more rigid re-learning schedule than Tania, who learned English only before the school examination or English Olympiads. In relation to their personalities and learning environment, Karina had shown metacognitive strategy application by maintaining her discipline in learning at school and home. At the same time, Tania applied an effective strategy by flipping her perceptions of the obstacles in learning English into opportunities to avoid her parents' regrets when she failed in school and competition. Tania applied indirect LLSs (affective strategy) during her loneliness at home by optimizing the functions of her gadgets and home internet to open gameplay and tutorial videos. This LLS application means that Tania understood her situation and tried to find the best way to meet her learning joy and obtain language input (Nguyen and Terry 2017).

Reflecting on both of the participants' choices of LLSs, Karina applied metacognitive strategy as an addition and booster to her application of memory

strategy. Her motivation to be the best in any English learning environment triggered her to put more effort (Al-Munawarrah 2018). Tania used an effective strategy because she should find a way to overcome her psychological problem, accept the situation, and make her parents proud of her. She built her internal motivation and supported it with the external motivation from her parents to solve the problem (Buendia and Martin 2017). These results were supported by Sadriyeva's (2021) study, which proved that introvert EFL learners tended to choose more personal LLSs, such as affective and compensation strategies, than the extroverts who chose LLSs that appropriated to their routine learning memory and metacognitive strategies. Tania's choices of LLSs were based on her individual pace and introverted personality, while Karina chose LLSs according to her social competitiveness with her schoolmates.

Discussing both participants' experiences in LLSs application to achieve success in English Olympiads, the LLSs choices were affected by the participants' high self-determination to achieve success. The LLSs applications served different benefits in tackling the English Olympiads' difficulties. Karina's higher learning frequency equipped her with more academic vocabulary and expressions obtained from the school English subject textbook. Tania's choice to employ YouTube videos aided her in getting more authentic English input. Both participants spent extra time and effort mingling with English (Ghafar and Alrefaee 2019; Mulyani 2020). Therefore, the present study revealed that any LLS application could enhance EFL learning success at various levels of achievement. This was supported by Habok and Magyar's (2018) study. Bhandari (2022) further mentioned that knowing each learner's LLSs could assist EFL teachers in being well-versed in the subject and dealing with pupils in the classroom.

4.3 Participant's learning environment and successful EFL learning

The learning environment plays a pivotal role in providing comprehensive input, supportive motivation, enough exposure, and fluency training for EFL learners (Renandya 2013). The participants' stories revealed that similar schools could have provided similar EFL learning situations and conditions for both participants. Karina experienced a non-abusive English learning class that supported her in finding her comfort to learn English. Then, her confidence raised parallelly with more achievements she obtained from English competitions. Conversely, Tania experienced verbal bullying, which slowly reduced her confidence and performance in learning English at school. She tried to find an alternative to provide a more conducive EFL learning environment that accommodates her passion (i.e., games and anime) and English learning. Then, her attempt brought her success. She used her achievements in English Olympiads to gain more confidence and maintain her self-esteem among her classmates (Koruk 2017). At home, both Karina and Tania could use their time freely for any activities they wanted to do since their parents were busy with their business. Their parents facilitated them with books, gadgets, and the internet for more English learning. Nguyen and Terry's (2017) study result appeared in this research participants' learning environment. The

availability of technology could affect the EFL learners' choice of LLSs and support their learning success if the participants use the technology wisely, as Tania did. So, the participants' learning environment difference was only at school.

Comparing both participants' stories, they all pay attention to the role of the language learning environment in aiding their EFL learning. Then, their stories proved that the learning environment promoted positive perceptions (Getie 2020) that motivated them to grow more learning attempts to obtain success in EFL learning, especially in winning the English Olympiads. Amiri and El-Karfa (2021) and Pariyanto and Pradipta (2020) supported this study finding by mentioning that students' achievements were significantly affected by the learning environments, namely societal, family, and school environments.

The three themes discussed in the present study are related to EFL learning success. According to the participants' stories, the LLSs (Pietrzykowska 2014; Nguyen and Terry 2017; Sadriyeva 2021; Bhandari 2022) and learning environment (Renandya 2013; Nguyen and Terry 2017; Al-Munawarrah 2018; Getie 2020; Pariyanto and Pradipta 2020; Amiri and El-Karfa 2021) contribute positively to EFL learning success, as proven by the achievements in English Olympiads. Then, mapping the selection of LLSs, this study's findings showed similar results to Sadriyeva's (2021) study that introverted learners tend to choose more personalized LLSs.

Nevertheless, EFL learners' personalities did not immediately affect the EFL learning achievements as long as the participants searched for solutions to maintain their learning progress, whether finding alternatives of better LLSs or a more conducive learning environment. This study's findings tackle Khoiriyah's (2016), Maniruzzaman and Aktar's (2010), and Suliman's (2014) studies results since this study proved that not only extroverted EFL learners could be successful in learning but also introverted. So, strong personalities can direct EFL learners to conduct positive attempts to gain learning success (Wirza 2018). Furthermore, the EFL learners' personality analysis can help EFL teachers or curriculum developers to map the learners' differences (i.e., choice of LLSs), which can be used as a basis to plan the lesson with the more supportive learning environment, with the ultimate goal to reach better EFL learners' learning success (Felder and Brent 2005).

5. Conclusion

Some conclusions can be drawn from the study findings and discussion. First, the teachers and education institutions should consider their EFL learners' differences, including the learners' personalities and the LLSs they chose to help them succeed in EFL learning. However, the EFL learners' personality requires other factors to show their effect on EFL learning success. Second, EFL learners' LLSs and learning environment positively influenced the learners' EFL learning success. Third, this study allows us to unveil the exploration of two successful EFL learners' lived experiences and perspectives. By focusing on them, the study can delve into the detailed narratives of their learning journeys, uncovering rich and contextualized insights into their successful EFL learning process, which later can

be reflection and adaptation of others. In addition, the present study provides theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study contributes to the theories affecting EFL learning success, especially EFL learning in the elementary school context. Practically, similar research procedures and imitations of successful practices reflected in stories can be adapted for different subjects and learning settings. Moreover, curriculum developers and policymakers can make informed decisions about creating learner-centered environments and implementing supportive policies to foster successful EFL learning outcomes. Finally, due to its limited number of participants and context, further studies are preferable to clarify this study's findings with more participants and different study contexts.

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