

**Strategies of Successful English Language Learners
(A Case Study of One EFL Learner with Unfortunate Conditions in A High School in
Boyolali)**

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Abstract: This article is aimed at reporting the research findings about learning problems and strategies used by a successful EFL learner although she has unfortunate conditions. The research was carried out in a high school in Boyolali. The sample of the research was one successful EFL learner with unfortunate conditions. Document analysis was based on learning achievements in Senior High School. It was used to determine the sample of the research. Meanwhile, in-depth interviews and observations were used to collect data about problems and strategies of the learner. The interviews were done with the learner, her English teachers, friends and parent. Data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification were used to analyze the data. The analysis result shows that the learner uses some effective strategies for either solutions of problem or skills improvement. Besides, it can be seen that although the learner has some unfortunate conditions that may impede her to attain learning achievements in the EFL context, she shows that she is able to overcome her problems through strategy uses and become a successful EFL learner.

Keywords: *learning problem, learning strategy, successful EFL learner, unfortunate condition*

INTRODUCTION

“When people are born, they do not know anything. They have to learn so that they are able to understand it”. These statements are stated by Lee (2010) in his journal “An Overview of Language Learning Strategies”. It is why learning is very important for people. By learning, they can broaden their knowledge and develop certain skills.

When people are learning, they definitely want to be successful. To achieve this, they have to do something. To reach this achievement, one of the learning techniques is they should identify their

learning needs. Beside that, to get more information about the material taught at school, they should search for additional learning resources to learn beside using books or other resources in the classroom. Learning English, for example: generally, when students learn English, they want to be able to use the language well. They want to be successful EFL learners who can listen, speak, read and write English well in communicating with others. To achieve this, they need to use other learning resources such as novels, songs and movies beside what they have got from school.

During the learning process, students cannot always learn every subject easily. They may face some learning problems and make efforts to solve the problems. They may need to find ways that can help for effective learning. For example, in listening, some may find difficulties in identifying speakers' intentions due to lack of vocabulary and grammar. Then, they may try to overcome the problems by listening to English songs or watching English movies. Through these ways, the students can also improve their listening skill.

The learners described above are called successful EFL learners. Wenden in Ambrosi-Randić and Kostić-Bobanović (2008) states, "Successful language learners generally tailor their strategies appropriate to their own personal needs as learners". Their learning needs may be solutions for their learning problems so that they may identify their problems in learning, then seeking ways to overcome these.

Then, learning strategies themselves are defined by Ghani in Hardan (2013) as "a facilitator in successful learning process. They are procedure, employed by the learners; in order to make their own language learning as successful as possible". In this case, the learners may use learning strategies to improve their English skills. They may find certain learning aids that can facilitate them in learning English. They may regard it as a chance to learn, also a chance for success.

Related to the characteristics of EFL learners, there are certainly different backgrounds among them. Some of them can come from unfortunate conditions, like low socio-economic status. This can be a constraint for them in learning. However, the writer is willing to find out whether they have strategies that can make them more

successful than others who come from fortunate conditions.

There have been so many researches about successful EFL learners. However, they have not focused on EFL learners with unfortunate conditions. Therefore, this article is aimed at reporting the research findings about problems faced by a successful EFL learner with unfortunate conditions and strategies used in solving the problems.

RESEARCH METHODS

The approach of the research is qualitative approach and the type of research design used by the the writer is case study. Generally, the aim of this type is to describe a phenomenon that is being researched. In the research, the phenomenon is EFL learners with unfortunate conditions that can be successful in learning because of strategy uses.

The research was carried out in a high school in Boyolali. The sample of the research was one successful EFL learner with unfortunate conditions. Indicators for determining whether the successful EFL learner comes from unfortunate conditions or not were she comes from a small town; she has low socio-economic status and parents who got low education; and she gets less sufficient facilities for learning. However, she is academically and non academically successful in learning English. Therefore, the way of choosing the sample was through criterion-based sampling.

The techniques used to collect data were in-depth interview, observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews and observations were used to collect data about the learner's problems and strategies. SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) systematized by Oxford (1990) was used for having interviews with the learner. It was as

interview guidelines to gather data about the learner's strategies. Meanwhile, English teachers, the learner's friends and parent were asked about the learner's learning behaviours. Document analysis was used to get information about the learner's academic achievements. It was done through analyzing the learner's school report, especially on the scores of the English lesson, and awards from English contests she has ever got.

In order to reach validity of the data, triangulation and member checking were used in the research. Triangulation was done by asking the English teachers, the learner's close friends and parent about the learner's problems and strategies in learning English. Denzin and Lincoln in Wahyuni (2012) state that triangulation is used in order to minimize and understand any differences/biases held by people in various roles. Meanwhile, member checking was done by asking the interviewees for confirmation of what they have reported. This technique was used in order to verify the writer's interpretations and conclusions with the interviewees themselves (Denzin and Lincoln in Wahyuni, 2012).

The techniques of data analysis used in the research included data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction was done through the process of coding. Coding involves assigning units of meaning to the inferential information in the form of data chunks (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 56). Then, these codes can be displayed or organized to allow the conclusion drawing and verification.

In the stage of data reduction, the identification of the learner's problems and strategies was done by making transcriptions from the interviews and making field notes from the classroom observations so that data

could be analyzed more easily. Each form of strategy use found in the interview transcripts and field notes was coded with some initial letters that could describe strategy types organized by Oxford. Then, the interview transcripts of the learner's teachers, close friends and parent were analyzed in the same way. The data obtained from the learner, her teachers, close friends and parent were separately analyzed.

Meanwhile, in the stage of data display, the result of the data reduction was organized into 4 tables. It was started with the learner's table that described her problems and strategies completed with the codes and the types in learning English. Then, it was continued with table of the teacher, friend and parent. The table was used in order to make the data well-organized and clear so that readers can understand them easily.

After that, conclusion drawing and verification could be done. These techniques were chosen in order to get data that might be able to give other strong evidences changing the tentative conclusions drawn. If the data have constancy, fixed conclusions can be drawn in order to be written in the research findings report. Beside that, through these techniques, clear research findings can be acquired to draw final conclusions that are more valid and credible.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the the research problems, research findings is divided into two sections. The first section is related to the description of the successful EFL learner's problems in learning English, and the other section is related to the description of learning strategies she uses. Data analysis is based on the interviews with the learner because she could give detailed information

to answer the research problems. Besides, the data analysis is based on the interviews with the English teachers, the learner's friends, also on the classroom observations. Information could not be gained from the learner's parents because her father said that

he and the learner's mother do not monitor her learning at home. Hence, they could not describe her learning behaviours.

Based on the sets of information from the informants, Faiz's overall learning problems are set out in Table 1:

Table 1. Learner's Problems

Learning Problems Reported by Faiz Himself	Faiz's Learning Problems Reported by Other Informants
1. Lack of grammar and pronunciation when speaking	1. Unavailable learning facilities
2. Feeling nervous during speaking performance	2. Understanding expressions
3. Understanding native speakers' accents	3. Lack of confidence
4. Speakers speaking too fast	4. Lack of vocabulary
5. Focusing when listening	5. Lack of grammar
6. Understanding unfamiliar words	
7. Understanding paragraphs	
8. Misspelling	

Table 1 demonstrates some similar learning problems reported by Faiz and other informants. They are problems on grammar, vocabulary and self confidence. It shows that there are at least 3 main problems faced by Faiz in learning English, and the others are problems on pronunciation, speakers' speaking rates, focusing when listening, spelling and learning facilities. Thus, there are at least 8 learning problems found in the research: lack of grammar, lack of vocabulary, lack of pronunciation, speakers speaking too fast, focusing when listening, lack of confidence, misspelling, and unavailable learning facilities. These problems are found on four main aspects of language learning: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Problems Faiz usually faces in learning English are common problems in the EFL context. Other learners sometimes face them too. They may have difficulties on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling and self confidence during learning process. However, something that can make an EFL learner different from others is the

efforts to overcome those problems. They may have the same problems but not the responses to them. These are then called 'learning strategies'.

Beside problems directly related to language learning, there are some factors outside Faiz that may become problems for her. They are unfortunate conditions like low socio-economic status, remote domicile and low level of parent education. They may be able to impede her to reach successful learning. For example, Faiz's parents cannot always provide learning facilities she needs because they have no funds. However, she can prove that those problems do not affect her quality of learning. Through utilizing available learning facilities around her, she can become a successful learner.

According to Israelson (2012), learners with unfortunate conditions are more likely to fail than to succeed in the academic context. Otherwise, in the research Faiz shows that she refuses to be part of that label. She is capable of moving beyond that label to achieve her greatest dream. It can also be seen that Faiz has become a

successful EFL learner. She seeks opportunities to practice English and performs better than other learners who come from more fortunate conditions.

Faiz uses all strategy groups, but not all strategy types. However, it still seems good. It indicates she has a balance in using those learning strategies. She can organize them well. She can apply proper strategies in particular learning situations so that she can learn English more effectively. As a result of applying various strategies in learning English, she can also overcome problems she usually faces in learning English and get fewer problems. She does not only use the strategies to overcome learning problems she has, but also to improve her English skills.

The strategies Faiz uses in her learning are strategy of **creating mental linkages, employing action, practicing, analyzing and reasoning, creating structure for input and output, guessing intelligently, overcoming limitations in speaking and writing, centering your learning, arranging and planning your learning, evaluating your learning, taking your emotional temperature, encouraging yourself, lowering your anxiety, asking questions, cooperating with others, and empathizing with others**. Thus, she applies at least 16 strategy types from 19 strategy types existing in Oxford's classification model.

Faiz's learning strategies reported by herself and other informants are compared in Table 2:

Table 2. Learner's Strategies

Learning Strategies Reported by Faiz Herself	Faiz's Learning Strategies Reported by Other Informants
Memory strategies	
1. Creating mental linkages	
2. Employing action	
Cognitive strategies	Cognitive strategies
1. Practicing	1. Practicing
2. Analyzing and reasoning	
3. Creating structure for input and output	
Compensation strategies	
1. Guessing intelligently	
2. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing	
Metacognitive strategies	Metacognitive strategies
1. Centering your learning	1. Centering your learning
2. Arranging and planning your learning	2. Arranging and planning your learning
3. Evaluating your learning	3. Evaluating your learning
Affective strategies	Affective strategies
1. Taking your emotional temperature	1. Lowering your anxiety
2. Encouraging yourself	
3. Lowering your anxiety	
Social strategies	Social strategies
1. Asking questions	1. Asking questions
2. Cooperating with others	2. Cooperating with others
3. Empathizing with others	

Memory strategies and compensation strategies do not exist in other's reports. Faiz's teachers, friends and the writer as the observer did not mention these strategies

because they are possibly not too apparent in the teaching and learning process. However, some similarities on Faiz's learning strategies can be still found here. All Faiz's

learning strategies reported by the other informants exist on her self report. She applies strategy of **practicing, centering your learning, arranging and planning your learning, evaluating your learning, lowering your anxiety, asking questions and cooperating with others**. Beside these, she added information about other strategies she usually uses in learning English. She revealed at least 16 strategy types from 19 strategy types existing in Oxford's classification model. Through these, she tries to overcome problems she usually faces in learning English.

Wenden in Ambrosi-Randić and Kostić-Bobanović (2008) states, "Successful language learners generally tailor their strategies appropriate to their own personal needs as learners". In line with Wenden, Faiz uses strategies for the needs of overcoming her problems and improving her English skills.

According to Fenner (2011), Faiz can be a successful EFL learner because she makes much effort in learning. It is shown through strategy uses. One of the strategy uses also indicates she is a good EFL learner. It is **guessing intelligently** strategy. By applying this in learning English, it can be seen that she is a willing and accurate guesser (Rubin in Hardan, 2013). Besides, as stated by Rubin, she can be categorized as a good EFL learner because she seeks practice opportunities such as through English club and debate team, monitors their speech as well as that of others and pays attention to meaning.

Information about Faiz's learning behaviours could not be gained from her parents. In the interview with her father, he said that he and Faiz's mother do not know her learning behaviours at home. They do not intentionally monitor her learning. Based on these, the researcher found a possibility

related to her learning behaviours. The researcher assumes she is an autonomous learner indeed. As discussed earlier, it can be seen that she manages her learning in order to achieve successful learning. Through applying various strategies in learning English, she can overcome her problems and improve her English skills. It is as stated by Allwright & Little in Oxford (2003) that learning strategies can enable students to become more autonomous learners.

One of behaviours that is very important in learning is an active role. It is because an active role can create successful learning (Hardan, 2013). In the result findings, it can be seen that Faiz is an active learner. She can represent the use of good and proper strategies that are not only able to overcome her own learning problems, but also able to improve her English skills.

Oxford in Hardan (2013) says, "Good EFL learners combat inhibition by using positive self-talk, by extensive use of practicing in private, and by putting themselves in situations where they have to participate communicatively". In this case, Faiz has represented herself as a good EFL learner because she has these characteristics in her learning. She usually uses strategy of **encouraging yourself, practicing and arranging and planning your learning**. Related to **encouraging yourself** strategy, she usually creates positive statements in her mind in order to lower her anxiety and motivate herself in learning. About **practicing** strategy, as mentioned before she usually practices English through songs, movies and the others. Then, one of **arranging and planning your learning** strategy types she also uses is seeking practice opportunities. For example, she actively joins English Club and debate team at school.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

From the result of the research, it can be concluded that basically, the learning behaviours of the successful EFL learner have conformities with the behaviours or characteristics of the successful EFL learners shown in the literature. The learner belongs to more successful language learners because she is aware of the strategies she uses and why she employs them in her learning; she tailors her strategies appropriate to her own personal needs - solutions of problem and skills improvement; and she uses a large number of language learning strategies more frequently than less successful learners. She has more strategies than problems in learning English. It is because she has various strategies which are effective to be used not only for solutions of learning problem, but also for language skills improvement. They can make her learning more successful. Besides, learning strategies she uses enable her to become more autonomous. She has good abilities in managing her learning, overcoming her learning problems and improving her skills. She can keep her strategy uses balanced. Meanwhile, her unfortunate conditions do not impede her to reach achievements in the EFL context. She has strategies that can make her more successful than others who come from fortunate conditions. One of them is affective strategies. She has high motivation to reach bright future by learning as well as she can.

According to the research findings and discussion, the writer suggests strategy training should be given to teachers and learners. It should be started with the teachers so that they can demonstrate to the learners the specific applications of the strategies and promote the transfer of

strategies to new tasks. Besides, strategy-based instruction should become a consideration in the *MGMP (Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran)*. Through socialization, teachers can either apply this method or integrate it with regular instruction in the classroom in order to make the teaching and learning process more successful. Also, similar researches about language learning strategies should be organized. They are needed on the most effective ways to motivate and train teachers in incorporating learning strategy instruction in their foreign language classrooms and on the types of instructional materials that best facilitate this process.

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