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SUCCESSFUL ENGLISH LEARNERS' AUTONOMY: A LOOK INTO THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECOLOGY

Dwitiya Ari Nugrahaeni*, Afi Normawati, Noor Sahid Kusuma Hadi Manggolo

English Education Department, Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Universitas Tidar, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: Jl. Kapten Suparman No. 39, Magelang, Central Java, 56116, Indonesia. Email address: dwitiya.nugrahaeni@untidar.ac.id

a r t i c l e i n f o

a b s t r a c t

Despite the significant allocation of time and resources to formal classroom English teaching in Indonesia, the outcomes have not been found to be commensurate or equivalent. Despite all the constraints, a minority of EFL learners in Indonesia have demonstrated exceptional achievements in their learning journey, earning them the recognition of successful learners. This narrative inquiry research aims to study the participants' out-of-class learning experience viewed from the perspective of ecology, or how these successful learners exercise their control over the affordances and limitations in their learning environment. To gain extensive exploration of the experience, this study incorporated the participants' language learning careers (LLC). In order to complement the data and to gain deeper insights into the participants' experiences, follow-up interviews were also conducted. The result demonstrated that the participants exercised their autonomous learning strategies in three dimensions of learning, namely the emergence of interest, the creation of learning opportunities, and the boundaries crossing. Through these dimensions, the participants navigate and manage the resources, opportunities, and constraint in their learning journey. This study provides insights into the management of learning beyond the classroom through the awareness of the environment.

INTRODUCTION

Despite years of dedicated effort by Indonesian students to learn English, Indonesia has experienced a consistent decline in its English Proficiency Levels. In a survey of English Proficiency Index (EPI) conducted by Education First, it was revealed that Indonesian students' EPI has dropped from the 61st rank out of 100 countries in 2019 to 81st rank out of 111 countries in 2022 (Education First, 2022). This outcome is inversely proportional with the effort put by the government to teach English at schools. Since its inclusion into the curriculum in 1967, English has been widely taught in formal classrooms in Indonesia. Although it was removed from the 2013 curriculum for elementary schools and its hours are reduced in high schools (Zein et al., 2020), schools still offer English to the students as an enrichment. Typically, students in Indonesia learn English for ten to twelve years, not to mention the time they learn English in after-school tutoring classes.

This condition could be attributed to the fact that English is not generally used in daily communication in this country in which it provides little to no exposure of English to the students (Masduqi, 2011). The English learning process in the classroom becomes the sole resource through which the students are exposed to the language. Therefore, with the low level of proficiency, it is evident that classroom instruction fails to engage with the students' need of

the language use and sufficiently prepare the students for effective English communication (Cole & Vanderplank, 2016; Namaziandost et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, despite the limitations, certain students managed to overcome the constraints and attained academic success by effectively employed a range of learning strategies to enhance their performance. A number of researchers observed that students who excel in language learning, most of the time, go beyond relying exclusively on classroom instruction. Instead, they maximize their potential outside of class by skillfully managing their autonomous learning and incorporating a diverse range of strategies for learning beyond the classroom (Cole & Vanderplank, 2016; Hsieh & Hsieh, 2019; Lai, 2019; Mynard, 2019; Palfreyman, 2014; Reinders & Benson, 2017). According to the research conducted by Cole & Vanderplank (2016), it suggests that the majority of learning, particularly in language learning, takes place beyond the confines of the classroom. This discovery reinforces the importance of out-of-class learning in facilitating successful acquisition of a foreign language.

Out-of-class learning is closely intertwined with learner's autonomy as the former cannot occur unless the learners are able to fully attain autonomy. In his work, Benson (2011) identifies that learner's autonomy is someone's ability to take charge in controlling his or her own learning. This means that successful and effective learners are able to leverage a vast range of learning resources and ensure their accessibility, thereby enhancing their learning and competence (Mynard, 2019). In general sense, Cotterall (2009) provides an overview indicating that successful autonomous learners exert control over three key aspects of language learning. Those aspects are Holec's (1979, as cited in Cotterall, 2009) learning methodology, which pertains on how learners manage their learning; Little's (1991) psychological aspect which focuses on how learners develop psychological connection with what they are learning; and Benson's (2001) content aspect which focuses on the learners need to control what they want to learn. Subsequently, Benson (2011) summarizes these key aspects into three dimensions of autonomous learning: learning management, cognitive processing, and learning content. Furthermore, (Murray et al., 2014) propose an additional dimension to complement the prior three dimensions, which is referred to as learning space. Within their study, learning space is construed as a place or time where learners get together as a community of practice, exchanging their personal, academic, and cultural background. This space serves as a site of engagement in which learners gain knowledge and learn naturally.

The existence of those four learning dimensions implies that learner autonomy does not solely pertain to the individual learner, rather it is heavily influenced by the surrounding environment. This notion is known as learning ecology. Barron (2006) defines learning ecology to a collection of environments, whether physical or virtual, that encompass various activities, resources, interactions, and relationships that are emerged to facilitate and enhance the learning process. In accordance with Barron (2006), Palfreyman (2014) identifies learning ecology as the interplay between different learning environments and how learners actively interact with those environments to optimize their learning experiences. According to (Barron, 2006), this perspective highlights the significance of learners in assessing their abilities and effectively utilizing the various elements that are available in their learning environments across different learning contexts to improve their skills. This approach specifically aims to bridge the gap between in-class and out-of-class learning experiences, whether in physical or virtual settings. The understanding of autonomous learning through ecological viewpoint has made it possible to examine the progression of L2 (second language) development as learners engage with a various tools, artifacts, and communities, observing how this development unfolds and evolves

over time and in different stages (Godwin-Jones, 2019). In analyzing out-of-class autonomous learning through ecological perspectives, it is important to investigate how the learners navigate their control through the limitations and affordances, the learners' interest, and the resources available or made available to them in their space (Barron, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2019, 2023; Murray et al., 2014; Palfreyman, 2014). According to Palfreyman (2014), the learning resources in the ecological viewpoint can categorized into three categories. The first category is material resources, which include physical items such as books or computers. The second category is social resources, referring to the presence of interlocutors who can engage in interaction. The third one is discursive resources, which involve the learners' ability to discern, though habituation process, what constitutes a learning opportunity and what does not.

Numerous researchers, such as Cotterall and Murray (2009), Murray and Fujishima (2013), Hsieh and Hsieh (2019), Song (2020), and Gomes Junior (2020) have conducted empirical studies in the field of learning ecology and learners' autonomy in language learning. Their studies aimed to go beyond theory and examine the actual perspectives, strategies, and behaviors of learners in taking control of their learning. However, these studies primarily focused on understanding how learners approach their learning without guaranteeing their success. While it is valuable to analyze how learners acquire a second language, it is also crucial to ensure that their learning methods lead to actual achievement.

In light of the growing significance of autonomous learning beyond the classroom in determining learner success, this study seeks to analyze the out-of-class English learning process of two successful EFL learners in Indonesia from an ecological standpoint. In doing so, this study's aim is to address the question of how the participants engaged in out-of-class learning and exercised control over their learning within their environment that eventually resulted in their success. Examining out-of-class learning practices from an ecological perspective offers valuable insights into optimizing learning opportunities, particularly in countries where English is considered a foreign language and resources may be limited. Research in this area not only raises students' awareness of available resources but also provides teachers with valuable insights to encourage and facilitate language learning beyond the classroom, particularly in situations where exposure to English is deemed inadequate.

METHOD

Research Design

This research followed a narrative inquiry design, in which it aimed to report and study the participants' life exprence in the aspect of second language learning. In doing so, this study asked the participants to narrate their language learning experience in the form of written language learning career (Benson, 2011a). They recited their learning journey in chronological order and emphasized on how they interacted with the affordances and limitations that they faced during the process. An interview was also conducted to learn more about their success in the process and to elaborate on the aspects that needed confirmation.

Participants

The participants of this narrative study were two Indonesian successful English learners, named Tarin and Kalia (pseudonyms). These individuals were deemed successful in their English learning journey as they had acquired the ability to actively utilize the language, leading to achievements and recognition in their respective professional fields, thus advancing their careers.

Tarin was a 40-year-old English teacher, writer, and entrepreneur. She first encountered English when she was in her fourth grade. Over the course of 30 years, Tarin dedicated herself to learning and immersing herself in the language. As a result, she was able to achieve a score of 8 in her IELTS test, become an English teacher, establish her own private English course in Indonesia, author more than ten books published by one of the prominent online publishers in the United States, and serve as an interpreter for international NGOs operating in Indonesia.

Kalia was a 30-year-old mathematics teacher who had been engaged in learning English for approximately 26 years. Despite not specializing in English like Tarin, she successfully pursued a career as a mathematics teacher at an international educational institution in Indonesia. In this role, she taught students from diverse backgrounds, including those whose first language was English. Additionally, Kalia achieved recognition for her scholarly work, having published academic articles in various international journals and she was on track to secure a scholarship for her Ph.D abroad.

Tarin and Kalia encountered limitations in their English learning journey as they had never resided outside of Indonesia. English was also not spoken within their families, and their exposure of English primarily occurred in the classroom settings. Despite these constraints, they successfully managed their out-of-class learning to maximize their English exposure and proficiency.

Instrument of data collection

The primary instrument in collecting the data for this study was the participants' narrative written in the form of language learning careers (LLC). According to Benson (2011a), LLC is a personal account of an individual's language learning experience that goes beyond just recounting the story. It involves the incorporation of the individual's conceptions and constructs that shape their learning process. The LLC not only narrates the language learning journey, but also captures the process of identity formation as a language learner, which ultimately influences how individuals take control of their own learning process. In collecting the narratives, the participants were asked to write their language learning career in chronological manner and incorporate their perceptions, behaviors, and responses towards the affordances and limitations they encountered. An unstructured interview was then conducted to provide more elaboration on the aspect where clarification was needed.

Data analysis

Upon analyzing the data collected, the participants' LLC could be categorized into Barron's (2006) three conjectures of the dynamics of learning. These conjectures were the emergence of interest, the creation of learning opportunities, and the crossing of boundaries. These conjectures clearly illustrate how the learners exert their control over the learning process through the affordances and limitations in their surroundings. The participants' excerpts were also analyzed in terms of resources that they utilized in their learning process based on Palfreyman's (2014) notion of material, social, and discursive resources.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Both of the LLCs revealed that the participants had gone through several stages in their language learning journey. Tarin's learning journey was classified into three stages namely the school phase, the in-between phase, and the university phase (see Table 1). On the other hand, Kalia's journey was classified into four stages including the elementary phase, the high school phase, the university phase, and the professional phase (see Table 2). The LLCs of both Tarin

and Kalia disclosed that throughout each phase of their journeys, they encountered various constraints, both external and internal. However, they successfully utilized the opportunities and advantages provided by their surroundings to overcome these limitations. In each of their stages, both participants experienced the three conjectures of dynamics of learning (Barron, 2006)

Table 1. Tarin's Language Learning Career Summary

Phases	Learning Journey
The school phase	- She did not like English.
	- She liked English songs because her father used to play them despite not understanding the meaning.
	- She was the school's singer and she wanted to be able to sing English songs in competitions.
	- Her family at that time could not afford internet or computer, so she learned the lyrics from the cassette covers and music magazines she borrowed from the local book rental.
	- She learned the meaning by using dictionary. The more she knew the meaning the more she liked English.
	- In senior high school, she got an assignment from her English teacher to write English learning journal once every two weeks.
	- Although seemed tedious at the beginning, she started to like it because she could monitor her learning. She kept doing it even after she passed the course.
	- She also had several assignments that needed her to do presentations in the classroom. She liked to practice at home in front of the mirrors.
	- She sometimes created her own topics and presented it in front of her family members (although they did not speak English)
	- She wanted to study English in the higher degree and wanted to pursue a career in English education.
The in-between phase	- Because of family matters, she could not apply for a university that year.
	- She finally had a computer and internet connection and started to post the journals she wrote in high school on a blogging website.
	- She liked to spend time chatting with foreigners through a chatting application to improve her English.
	- She liked to hang out with her friends who studied in the English faculty where she wanted to apply. She practiced English conversation with them and asked them to borrow some English books for her.
	- She got interested in simplified novels (Penguin Reader simplified texts).
	- She tried to find the Indonesian version of the books, translate them into English, and compared her translation with the English versions
The university phase	- She kept writing on her blog, chatting with foreigners, and reading books.
	- She admitted that she learned communication styles, writing styles, writing flow, and word choices from those activities which were very helpful for her assignments.
	- She also applied for a part time job in teaching Bahasa Indonesia to foreigners (mostly from Australia and USA) in an organization in her university. At the end of each meeting, she liked to spend time with the students to communicate using English.
	- She performed well in the university, and she was asked by her lecturer to be a teaching assistance to teach students in different faculties.
	- Through this, she learned about good teaching materials.
	- She wanted to have her own English course and she started to spend some of her monthly allowance to collect textbooks and teaching materials.

Table 2. Kalia's Language Learning Career Summary

Phases	Learning Journey
The elementary phase	- She only learned English in class. - She liked Disney's animation, her father provided her with Disney's CD, cassettes, and magazines. - She listened to Disney's songs, read the magazines, watched Disney movies, and learned from Disney's Magic English CD. - She liked English although she was still in passive level. - She started to like Western singers and boybands and learned English phrases from the songs. - She also liked Harry Potter movies which helped her to learn English. - All these resources inspired her to become fluent in English.
The high school phase	- Her school divided the students into regular and immersion classes. In the latter, the students were taught bilingually in Indonesian and English. - When the division of the classes was no longer in practice, students of both classes were merged. She was placed in a class where the majority of the students were from the immersion classes. - she felt insecure because her friends were much better in English than her. Especially in terms of the active skills. - She was not confident in showing her ability in English. - She kept reminded of her dream to be able to become fluent in English, she tried to ask one of her friends to be her speaking partner. - Through this, she learned to use English actively and she felt comfortable learning with her friend.
The university phase	- She wanted to pass an English Proficiency Test to graduate from the university. - She learned English through books and YouTube videos. - Because she knew that she felt comfortable learning from people her age, she joined an English club conducted by English Department students. - She became more motivated to improve her English when she was in her master's study, and she had to publish academic articles in English. - She read numerous academic articles to learn the academic use of English. - She presented her works in international conferences and applied as a moderator to practice her confidence in using English in different forum than what she had had before.
The professional phase	- She taught in a private education institution, and she was tasked to teach international classes. - She had to teach Mathematics to international students who had different linguistic backgrounds. - At the beginning, she was worried that she would not perform well teaching using English. - She took several minutes before going into the lesson to talk with her students about daily topics.

Three dynamics of learning

a. The emergence of interest

The principal idea of this conjecture is to explore how various ideational resources can ignite curiosity and foster a desire to acquire knowledge while sustaining the process of learning. Nasir and Cook (2009 as cited in Ntow & Adler, 2019) define ideational resources as the realization of oneself and one's relationship with things or place that leads to the understanding of what is valued and what is not. (Barron, 2006) specifies these resources as interactions with other people, audio visual media, or tasks that the learners have to accomplish that spark their excitement to learn.

In Tarin's case, initially, she was uninterested in English. Nonetheless, her father's fascination in English songs incited her interest in the language. Her desire to be a skilled singer and perform English songs well further her enthusiasm to learn English. In the follow up interview, she reasoned that her understanding of the lyrics meaning was needed to perform the songs well, therefore she was motivated to translate the lyrics to Indonesian.

> *"I need to know the meaning of the lyrics because that way, I can sing the songs well. For me, singing is not just about performing the song, I also need to be able to convey the message. I forced myself to translate and understand the lyrics every time I prepared for my performance."* (Tarin)

From this experience, it can be seen that Tarin's strong desire to excel in her area of interest led her to a deep interest in English, which played a crucial role in sustaining her learning journey. Other than being a successful singer, Tarin also wanted to learn English in higher education and pursue a career in English Education. Therefore, she felt excited every time she received assignments in English subject because she considered that it would be useful to help her achieve her dream career. In this stage, Tarin had created an imagined future self that helped her motivated in her learning.

> *"I always wanted to be an English teacher. I thought teaching English was cool. Maybe that was because I thought that English was a subject that not many of my friends could do well in class. I liked doing English assignments because I could imagine giving them to my future students and what I would do differently if I were the teacher."* (Tarin)

Pavlenko and Norton, (2007) and Wang (2021) argue that the learners imagined self is plays a crucial role in shaping their learning outcomes by aiding them in the decision-making process, guiding their choices throughout their learning journey.

Unlike Tarin whose emergence of interest sparked at the outset of her learning journey and remained being motivated throughout the process, Kalia's interest in English fluctuated across different phases of her learning. At the beginning she was already motivated and interested in learning English to the point that she wanted to be fluent in English, which can be attributed to the audio-visual resources that her father provided for her. Nevertheless, she lost that spark when she was in high school due to her insecurities. In the subsequent interview, she stated that her childhood dream to become fluent in English helped her overcome her insecurities.

> *"Every time I felt insecure about my ability in English, I always remembered the time when I really wanted to be fluent in English to enjoy the Disney's movies when I was 5. I kept myself wanting to feel that feeling again."* (Kalia)

Kalia's case serves as another evidence that the imagined future self plays a significant role in fueling the learners' motivation to keep engaging with the learning process (Barron, 2006; Ntow & Adler, 2019; Wang, 2021).

b. *Creation of learning opportunity*

In this conjecture, Barron (2006) exemplifies that once the learners have finally incited their interest in learning, they will eventually take charge of determining and developing their learning opportunities that suit them. This concept is closely linked to the notion of affordances where learners, through their interactions with the environment, identify available resources and take appropriate actions based on them (Du & Zhang, 2022; Menezes, 2011). Both Tarin and Kalia's LLCs demonstrated how they exerted their control over the three learning resources namely material, social, and discursive resources (Palfreyman, 2014) to optimize their learning affordances.

The way Tarin utilized material resources in her learning journey can be seen in the way she made effective use of whatever available around her to learn English, such as cassette cover, dictionary, and magazine, particularly during the period where computers and internet were not readily available for her. Additionally, during her one-year break from study, she kept enriching her mind by reading books. She went above and beyond by translating books into English and comparing her translations with the original English versions. In the interview, she mentioned that her motivation for doing this was to keep her mind sharp during the break, and she expressed a sense of fulfillment from engaging in such activities.

> *"I did this because I didn't want to lose my ability in English. I wanted to keep using English and challenging myself to more difficult tasks."* (Tarin)

Not too far different from Tarin, Kalia's utilization of material resources involved making use of what was accessible in her environment, such as books, CDs, songs, and movies. The thing that set them apart was that Kalia had the advantage of her father providing all of them for her. Nonetheless, her awareness and proactive approach to taking control of her surroundings was what made her effort considered fruitful.

The second resources, namely the social resources, were the ones that both participants employed most in their learning process. Tarin effectively facilitated her learning process by asking her friends who were studying in the English Department to be her English conversation partner. She also spent quite a lot of time engaging in conversations with foreigners online and during her part-time job. In the interview, she expressed her awareness of the limited English exposure she had in her daily life, emphasizing that these interactions with native speakers granted her a natural form of communication that surpassed what she could acquire through classroom learning alone. Similar to what Tarin had done, Kalia also actively sought out opportunities to increase her English exposure by engaging in conversations with classmates as language partners and participating in an English club. During the time where she did not have conversation partners, she proactively sought more exposure to English by presenting in international seminars as well as taking a role as a moderator. Additionally, she also dedicated some time during her teaching sessions to have casual conversations with her foreign students. The interview revealed that she did this to establish rapport with the students while also learning the informal use of English.

> *"I liked to chat with my students, just asked them how their day was, their new toys, their favorite games. I just wanted to create a teacher-student bond and through these talks, I could also learn to use everyday English. I couldn't learn that at school."* (Kalia)

In terms of discursive resources, Palfreyman (2014) defines it as how learners, through their interactions with the environment, develop an understanding of what constitutes potential learning opportunities and what does not. In Tarin's case, despite facing limitations in facilities and English learning resources, she was resourceful in finding ways to maximize her learning and achieve her goals. During her one-year break between high school and university, she demonstrated a strong determination to continue her learning journey. She reached out to her friends who were studying at the university and borrowed English books from the university library through their student cards. While this unconventional approach may not be commonly adopted by learners, her unique approach to learning has allowed her to optimize her opportunity and make the most of it. While Tarin utilized these resources in a more general aspect of English, Kalia specifically focused on academic English. She dedicated considerable time to reading academic articles to enhance her understanding and develop proficiency in academic communication.

> *"For me, academic English is different. It is not the same as what I learned at school or from the conversations with my students. The style is different. It is more formal and there are a lot of words that I don't understand. I realized that the only way I could learn to use academic English was through reading. I tried to read a lot of academic articles. It was hard, but it helped me a lot."* (Kalia)

In the interview, Kalia expressed her realization that the English used in academic articles differed from what she was familiar with. Consequently, actively sought alternative approaches to familiarize herself with the academic culture of English. In this case, she showcased her awareness and ability to decide which resources would best cater for her specific learning needs.

c. Crossing the boundary

This third conjecture explores the concept of bi-directional learning, emphasizing that learning transcends various contexts and spaces, mutually influencing one another (Barron, 2006). In Tarin's LLC, she frequently exemplified this concept. The way she consistently wrote journals during her high school years even after she passed the course has showcased her ability to transfer and apply what she learned in the classroom to enhance her out-of-class learning. She added, in the interview, that her journal helped her with her English writing skills which eventually built confidence when she studied in the university.

> *"Writing journals was always a nice activity for me because it was like writing a diary. Maybe I was too old to write a diary but with journals, I could express what I felt about my language learning, my new vocabulary, my new favorite movie, my difficulties, everything."* (Tarin)

> *"...and the journals that I wrote, I helped me a lot in my writing class. I could structure sentences well and my teacher told me this too."* (Tarin)

Additionally, her proactive efforts in reading and translating books even before starting university proved to be beneficial in her in-class learning experiences. Her ability to successfully crossed the boundary of learning and derived benefit from that

was attributed to her interest and initiative in responding to that interest (González-Sanmamed et al., 2019).

Another form of boundary crossing in learning that is observed from the participants' LLCs is the way they move flexibly among their roles as teacher, student, and study mate to maximize their learning journey. During her time working as a part time Indonesian teacher to foreign students, Tarin positioned herself not only as a teacher, but also as a student who was willing to learn from her students. Similar to Tarin, Kalia also utilized her time teaching foreign students to also, unwittingly to the students, learn English from them. She did this through the casual conversation that she did with the students. Through this third dimension of learning, both Tarin and Kalia exemplified that switching between roles had provided them with diverse learning and teaching opportunities. It helped them enrich their perspective of learning which was important in shaping them as teachers. According to Mercado (2015), the incorporation of learning experiences across various settings can enhance and complement the knowledge attained by learners in each setting. This integration facilitates the development of effective strategies to achieve personal learning objectives and enhances teaching skills. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), it also assists learners in overcoming existing constraints, particularly in terms of limited exposure for English and the opportunities for English language practice.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated the way two successful EFL learners exercised their control over their out-of-class learning by utilizing resources available to attain maximum result in learning English. The dimensions of learning ecology proposed by Barron (2006) clearly captured this phenomenon. The analysis of the participants' learning approach reveals that both participants assessed the advantages of learning, envisioned their future selves, which ignited their interest in English. Furthermore, they actively created and accessed learning opportunities while ensuring consistency and alignment across different learning settings. This narrative study aims to offer valuable insights for not only learners, but also teachers and parents, encouraging collaboration and awareness in providing abundant learning opportunities. In today's era, learning opportunities is and should be available beyond the boundaries of classroom walls (Cole & Vanderplank, 2016). Expanding the learning space allows for a greater variety of resources that learners can choose to suit their individual needs. Further research similar to this study in the field of second language learning are necessary to generate dependable empirical data. Integrating such studies into pedagogy would be highly beneficial as it would enhance students' awareness of the opportunities presented by their learning environment. Research that delves into different levels of learners, such as primary school students, high school students, or university students can also be valuable to examine the different strategies these learners employ and how they are aware of the learning opportunities available in their environment. This awareness would, in turn, aid the learners in overcoming existing constraints that hinder the success in attaining proficiency in English.

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