

Students' Perceptions of Language Learning Environment and Their Engagement in EFL Learning

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Abstract: This study reported students' perceptions of language learning environment developed by one of the universities in Bandung in the form of dormitory project and their engagement in EFL learning. This study employed the qualitative descriptive method. A questionnaire adapted from McGhee (2007) and semi-structured interview using guidelines from Jones (2009) about the degree to which students are engaged in a learning experience was attempted to find out the answer to the problems proposed. The result of this study indicated that 74% students had a good perception of a language learning environment designed by the dormitory and most of them had the very high level of engagement in EFL learning. The findings of this research suggested the dormitory to improve the system so that the shortcomings felt by the students could be resolved.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is now becoming an obligatory to master more than one foreign languages because learning a foreign language is considered as one of the current demands for educators either teachers or students, particularly at university level. However, some universities in Indonesia design programs to provide students at the university level to learn foreign languages. One of the programs is contrived in the form of language dormitory project by one of the universities in Bandung, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learning is the preeminent program of the dormitory. Since its early beginning, the dormitory has tried to create a language learning environment where it is expected to be an effective place for students to stay and study altogether with other students who also have the same intention to learn a foreign language.

Concerning the real application of language learning environment, the dormitory tries to teach English to students and attempts to carry out and overcome the difficulties in EFL learning. Some of the efforts are not only giving much time allotted for learning in the classroom, but also designing English conversation, vocabulary enrichment, public speaking, and language day programs. It is clearly

indicated that there is a high orientation of the dormitory to increase students' engagement in EFL learning. This is in line with Ayrton and Moseley (2010) who stated that *"the interaction between student behaviors and institutional conditions are key factors in determining the nature and quality of student engagement"*. In other words, it can be identified that learning environment significantly affected students' engagement. What students perceive of language learning environment will automatically impact to their engagement in EFL learning, Jones (2009:23) added that *"A key to increase student engagement is finding efficient ways to measure it. When something is measured, summarized, and reported, it becomes important, and people pay attention"*. Thus, this research would like to try to investigate students' perceptions of language learning environment developed by the dormitory and to analyze their engagement in EFL learning. Understanding students' perceptions of language learning environment and their engagement in EFL learning may provide educators with additional information on how to best support and engage students with an effective language learning environment and overcome students' difficulties in EFL learning.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language Learning Environment

The environment is simply defined in Webster's dictionary (p.416) cited in Hodge and Townsend (2007) as "*the aggregate of social and cultural conditions that influence the life of the individual*". In relation to this research, the thing that is influenced is the language acquisition of an individual since it is known that environment gives a big influence to the individual language improvement. This is in line with Wang (2009) who believed that linguistics environment for language acquisition is very important. People who abroad or often speak a foreign language usually "*very motivated, they have a pressing desire to communicate and to get their meaning across*". Thus, there will be so many benefits can be felt by foreign language learners in learning language supported by an effective environment. Besides, it can make them easier in acquiring language that they wish to learn since they have many opportunities to speak and experiment with the language.

On the other hand, most foreign language learners who learn in formal education get many problems as the example they cannot be themselves while they are speaking, they also tend to be nervous some may be afraid of making mistakes and others may forget even easy words. According to Wang (2004) there are so many reasons for that condition, one of the most important reasons would be a language learning environment which is previously mentioned as the variable which gives many influences to the language learner acquisition and improvement. However, the dormitory designed programs to overcome those students' difficulties by building a language learning environment where students are expected to express themselves in learning English freely and continuously. There were several programs of this dormitory which focused on overcoming students' difficulties in learning English as a foreign language at university level. Those are: a) vocabulary enrichment b) conversation c) language day d) public speaking and e) English class. Those programs were expected to facilitate students with an effective language learning environment.

Knowing how students perceive the environment designed by the dormitory using McGhee (2007) instrument, which has been adapted to the real condition of the dormitory, about learning environment is appropriate with the aim of this study. The instrument has 4 sub-scales to be measured, those are: to know the students' perception of positive

environment, negative environment, their personal beliefs, and global evaluation involving a combination of the first four items of the standard course evaluation form (*the course as a whole, the course content, the instructor's contribution to the course, and the instructor's effectiveness in teaching the subject matter*).

2.2 Students' Engagement

"The first year experience in higher education is known to be important to students' outcomes, such as retention, persistence, completion and achievement" (Hillman, 2005).

Statement above shows how important first year experience in influencing students' achievement. One factor that influences students' first year experience is engagement as Kearsley and Shneiderman (1998) explain that engagement is a term to describe times where students are meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks. Various definitions about students' engagement have been suggested. Kuh et al. (2008: 542) states "*Student engagement represents both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices*". Chapman (2003) offers "*one—students' cognitive investment in, active participation in, and emotional commitment to their learning*". The Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) proposes another: "*students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning*" (ACER, 2008, p. VI). Those definitions only focused on the process of engagement not on what factor affects engagement itself. However, Schuetz (2008) emphasize students' motivation and effort as key factors in engagement. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) highlight the way educators practice and relate to their students, and Porter (2006) proposes the roles of institutional structures and cultures. Concerning those key factors in engagement, Leach and Zepke (2008) introduce four strands of students' engagement, those are: motivation and agency, interaction with peers and teachers, institutional structures and systems, and external influences. Those strands are tabulated below (Leach and Zepke, 2008: 2):

Indicators that can measure those extents include attendance rate and participation rates in extracurricular activities. He also suggested that students need to be engaged before they can apply higher order, creative thinking skills. They learn most effectively when the teacher makes sense and

meaning of the curriculum material being taught. This can only happen if the teacher has created a safe learning environment that encourages students to meet challenges and apply their skills to real-world, unpredictable situations inside and outside of school.

Besides, Jones (2009) also proposed details about the degree to which students are engaged in a learning experience. There are five strategies for measuring perception of engagement. For each aspect, questions are provided to encourage conversations with students, those are: Individual attention: students feel comfortable in seeking help and asking questions, clarity of learning: students can describe the purpose of the lesson or unit, meaningfulness of work: students find the work interesting, challenging, and connected to learning, rigorous thinking, students work on complex problems, create original solutions, and reflect on the quality of their work, performance orientation: students understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed. They also can describe the criteria by which their work will be evaluated. Those aspects then will be used as the guideline to conduct an interview.

3 METHOD

This research method employed qualitative descriptive method by taking questionnaire and semi-structured interview, of which this method highlighted explicitly about how language learning environment developed by a language dormitory in one of Universities in Bandung affected students' engagement in EFL learning which occurred naturally to the students who learned and stayed in the dormitory. English Dormitory of State University in Bandung was chosen as the research site of this study. The dormitory is designed to provide students at the first year of study to learn English as a foreign language. This condition is very fit with this study because *"the first year experience in higher education is known to be important to students' outcomes such as retention, persistence, completion and achievement"* (Hilman, 2005). 20 students were selected using purposive sampling technique as a subject of this study. Questionnaire adapted from McGhee (2007) and semi-structured interview using guidelines from Jones (2009) about the degree to which students are engaged in a learning experience were attempted to find out the answer to the questions mentioned above. There were 12 statements to be answered by respondents and 5 important points as the guideline to conduct an interview. The data calculated manually by calculating the percentages

and mean scores of the student responses to infer the data findings. The last, the analysis of each data collection was synthesized and discussed to answer the research questions. While the data from the interview was transcribed, coded, scored, analyzed and interpreted. It was also used to support the data from questionnaire in order to get more comprehensive information.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The overall analysis of the 12 items indicated that 74% students have good perception of a language learning environment designed by the dormitory. For more explicit explanation, it will be discussed as follows:

4.1 Positive Environment

There were five statements to see the students' perceptions of language learning environment design by the dormitory focusing on the positive environment. The result showed that 80% students felt that the dormitory provided them an environment for free and open expression of ideas, opinions, and beliefs in learning English (showed by mean score 4 in item 1) and it is also considered by them as a comfortable place to learn English (mean score 4,1 in item 3). In items 2 and 4 students were asked about their opinions about the assessment and equality assigned and treated by the instructors (all people involved in their learning process such as organizational structures, teachers, and staff), it was then resulted only 64% students who gave positive perceptions while the rest (36% students) perceived negatively. Despite that 78% students still felt that the instructors made them feel welcome in the dormitory.

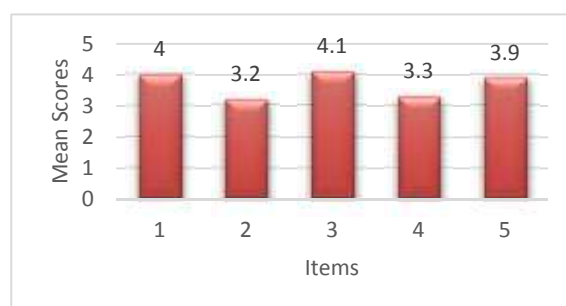


Figure 1: Students' perceptions of language learning environment: positive environment.

4.2 Negative Environment

At this stage, students were asked about their perception of learning environment focused on negative environment. Students were given three statements that indicate that the dormitory reflected bad environment that made them uncomfortable to stay even they felt isolated in the dormitory. The result from questionnaire indicated that 72% of students did not agree to these three statements. See figure below:

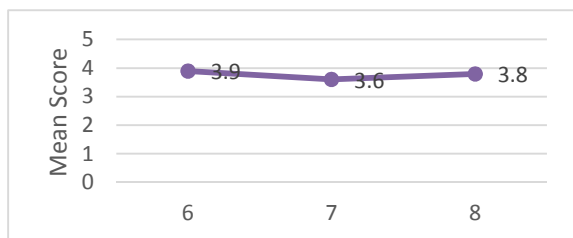


Figure 2. Students' perceptions of language learning environment: negative environment.

4.3 Standard Global Evaluation

The last sub-scale is standard global evaluation, in this section students were asked about their perceptions of the course (programs) as a whole, the course (programs) content, the instructor's contribution to the course, and the instructor's effectiveness in teaching the subject matter, portrayed in table 1 below:

Table 1: This caption has one line so it is centered.

No	Statements	Mean Score
1	The course (program) as a whole was:	4
2	The course (program) content was:	3,7
3	The instructor's contribution to the course was:	3,3
4	The instructor's effectiveness in teaching the subject matter was:	3,7

From the table above, it could be identified that students had very good perceptions of the programs designed by the dormitory to overcome their difficulties in learning English. Those programs were English conversation, vocabulary enrichment, English class, language day, public speaking. The second highest score was placed by the content of the programs and the instructors' effectiveness in teaching the subject matter. 74% of students have a good perception of any content submitted. According

to them, the content delivered in every program in accordance with which they need, for example, in the English class program. The content which was taught in this program was reading, writing and speaking. Unfortunately listening cannot be taught optimally because of inadequate facilities. Similarly, with the instructor's effectiveness in teaching the subject matter only 26% of students who have a bad perception of it. Not only a great content, but also it is offset by the instructor's effectiveness in teaching the subject matter. The last was the instructor's contribution to the course (programs), it decreased slightly compared to the instructors' effectiveness. It was caused by the lack of the dormitory Manager involvement in the students' progress of language.

4.4 Students' Engagement in EFL Learning

To know the extents of students' engagement in EFL learning, this research used an interview guideline adopted from Jones (2009) there were some aspects that needed to be considered, those were: students' individual attention, clarity of learning, meaningfulness of work, rigorous thinking, performance orientation.

After conducting semi-structured interview, it was resulted that the average students have a very high level of engagement. To be more clearly the following table described the whole level of students' engagement in EFL learning.

Table 2: Students' engagement level in EFL learning.

No	Students' Engagement Level	Range	F	Percentage
1	Very High	25-21	4	80%
2	High	20-16	1	20%
3	Medium	15-11	0	0
4	Low	10-6	0	0
5	Very Low	5-0	0	0

The table 2 showed the students experienced a very high engagement in EFL learning (4 out of 5 students or 80% of the total respondents) and high engagement (1 out of 5 students or 20% of the total respondents). These results supported prior study. Ayrton and Moseley (2010) research which resulted that "the interaction between student behaviors and institutional conditions are key factors in determining the nature and quality of student engagement" it was indicated that learning environment significantly

affected students' engagement. So did this research, it was resulted that students were facilitated by a language learning environment which was expected to be an effective place for students to learn English so that they had a very high quality of engagement in EFL learning.

As explained by Jones (2009) Individual attention is the first aspect should be considered in determining the quality of students' engagement. In this stage, students would feel comfortable in seeking help and asking questions. It was showed by student 3 when she got difficulties in learning English she did try solving her problem by herself then if she still could not solve it or she needed extra help, she did ask the manager of dormitory which she considered that they could help her.

STUDENTS 2 Difficulties:

- 1) "I have difficulties in public speaking because I often felt nervous and got lost of words even I forgot how to pronounce"
- 2) "In English class program, sometimes I did not understand what the lecturer said.....Because of the lack of my vocabulary and grammar I sometimes got lost of understanding"

Solving problem:

- 1) I often did practice with my friends and if I have to be a speaker in public speaking program I asked the manager of dormitory who handle the public speaking program to check my public speaking text.
- 2) I sat in the first line of students' seat in order to get more comprehension.

The second aspect is clarity of learning which meant students could describe the purpose of the lesson or unit. This was more comprehensive than describing the activity based on the lesson of the day involving the questions: What are you working on? What are you learning from this work? Showed by student 1 below:

STUDENT 1

"I learnt a lot, from English class program I learnt everything about speaking, writing, and reading. In vocabulary enrichment I got new vocabularies. Conversation and public speaking programs are almost the same program which have aim to increase students' ability in speaking but public speaking was more formal than conversation which made me little bit nervous. While language day program did not run

well, and it was not an effective program... Above all, the programs help students to learn English."

The third is meaningfulness of work which referred to the condition where students found the work interesting, challenging, and connected to learning involving questions: What are you learning? Is this work interesting to you? Why you are learning this? Do you know? Showed by student 3 below:

STUDENTS 3

At the first time, I joint the programs only caused by the rule which obliged all the students to join the programs. Then I realized that it was significantly increase my English knowledge. And finally, little bit I know how to speak English well because of joining the programs.

The forth step is rigorous thinking where students work on complex problems, create original solutions, and reflect on the quality of their work. How challenging is this work? In what ways do you have the opportunity to be creative? Showed by students 4 below:

STUDENT 4

"Definitely, more over there are so many people who are more capable in English than me. It encourage me to be better and able to speak English fluently. "

The last is performance orientation which indicated whether or not students understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed. They also can describe the criteria by which their work will be evaluated involving questions: How do you know you have done good work? What are some elements of quality work? Showed by student 5 below:

STUDENT 5

"So far, thing that has been done is only joining all the program provided seriously, giving all my attentions and having a note to the things which I considered important... Of course not, there are so many things that I need to know."

5 CONCLUSIONS

Students were more motivated towards instrumental than integrative as they hoped in achieving instrumental rewards in the form of grades, achievements, performance, future life, and good job. The mean scores of integrative were 3.1 or (77.5% students) and instrumental 3.5 (87.5% students) which meant most of the students learning English

attached to their language learning outcomes and future achievements than integrative purposes.

The data analysis showed that their attitudes towards English were placed in the high positions which had mean score 3.7 or about 93% of students had good attitudes, while the rest (7%) had bad attitudes. It is followed by attitudes towards English learning which indicated that 85% students had good attitude towards its learning. While 80% students had good attitudes towards its teacher and people. In total, there are only 17.5 % students have bad attitudes and 82.5% students have good attitudes (for all sub-scales of attitudes).

The findings of this research suggest the important role of teachers as a major factor of student achievement in learning in order to build students' motivations and attitudes towards English, since they are considered as predictors of success in learning foreign language.

Further research should look into another important variables that contribute to individual differences such as cognitive variables and personality. In order to give more comprehension to the investigation of individual differences that often experienced, perhaps always, by the learners.

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