

LEARNERS' CULTURAL BACKGROUND AND ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN A PESANTREN-BASED UNIVERSITY: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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Abstract

Learners' cultural background is a significant thing in learning English where they are expected to be able to adapt to the new language. The community of teachers and learners with pesantren backgrounds has unique characteristics different from the world of native English speakers. This research studies EFL learners' background of pesantren-based students in Universitas Sains Al Qur'an Wonosobo. It covers three issues, i.e. the way learners adapt their cultural background and experiences to English language learning, the way learners' cultural background is involved in the English language acquisition process, and the way learners' cultural conceptualization in their first language acquisition contributes to English language learning. Twenty English learners agreed to participate in the research. Adopting a qualitative design, the results highlighted that these learners have been able to make cultural adjustments from initially being Islamic boarding school students to becoming English language course students, students with their santri identity can make adjustments and sort out cultures that do not match their self-identity, they also felt that they preferred to gain knowledge about cultural concepts different from those they experienced in the pesantren. This research is important to support the consideration of curriculum and material development in Teaching English to students of Islamic schools, especially in intercultural language instruction.

Keywords: EFL, cultural background, students, santri

Introduction

In learning English as a foreign language, learner identity plays a crucial role in adapting to the target language. This identity is not static but dynamic, complex, and multifaceted, as learners engage in various discourses and negotiate their positions within different communities of practice (Piasecka, 2019; Xiao & Zhao 2022). Teachers and learners possess unique characteristics that influence this identity construction. For instance, interactional competence significantly

impacts how learners construct their desired identities, as seen in the case of Jordanian learners who used linguistic strategies to shape their identities in English (Alali, et.al., 2020). Identifying these learners' identities makes it evident how their unique cultures influence their lives and perspectives, as demonstrated in studies where learners' identities are shaped by their social contexts and language experiences (Xiao & Zhao, 2022; Shahri, 2018). Therefore, in acquiring the target language, it is essential to conduct research related to identifying the identity of English learners, as this understanding can enhance teaching strategies and learning outcomes (Anwaruddin, 2012; Teng, 2018).

In this paper, the researcher presents the results of research conducted on students in the Islamic faculties of a pesantren-based university in Wonosobo in English courses. They have unique and exclusive characteristics because most also study at pesantren around the university. In this study, the researcher explored several things, such as how the students connect their identities with their learning experiences in acquiring English so far. In addition, it was also identified how the identity of students as learners with unique backgrounds in their schools stimulates them towards the existence of the target language which results in the achievement of learning outcomes. In this case, the students were also examined to see whether they had a conceptualization of culture that was no different from when they first learned English.

Literary Review

In every instructional process, two key parties are involved: the learner and the community where the learning takes place. The instructional process encompasses various teaching concepts, including the material taught, the identity and methods of the teacher, and the implementation process. Learners bring prior knowledge, which serves as a foundation for acquiring new material. This prior knowledge is crucial as it influences how learners engage with new content and instructional strategies (Shuell, 1988). The role of the community is significant, as learning is inherently social, and the community can enhance the learning experience by fostering a sense of shared purpose and connectedness (Shea, 2006; Shea, et.al., 2005; Crawford, et.al., 1999).

English teachers can enhance students' motivation by fostering instrumental motivation, which is driven by practical goals such as passing exams. This type of motivation is particularly effective in contexts where students perceive learning English as essential for academic success and future career opportunities. Research indicates that instrumental motivation significantly correlates with English proficiency, as students are motivated by the necessity to achieve specific outcomes, such as passing exams or securing better job prospects (Lukmani, 1972; Rozmatovna, 2020; Siahaan, A., et.al., 2022). In various

educational settings, students with strong instrumental motivation demonstrate higher engagement and success in language learning, as they view English proficiency as a means to achieve their personal and professional goals (Siahaan, A., et.al., 2022; Wisnuwardhani, 2022; Radfar, & Lengkanawati, 2020). By emphasizing the practical benefits of learning English, teachers can help students connect their language acquisition efforts to tangible future benefits, thereby enhancing their motivation and commitment to learning (Rozmatovna, 2020; Siahaan, A., et.al., 2022; Garini & Pratolo, 2024).

One of the ways that English teachers can do this is by encouraging the learners to have instrumental motivation in which they base their interest on their purposes as students who should pass the exam (Rahman and Sahayu, 2020). They can be motivated by inducing that learning the target language is a requirement for them to be able to pass the English examination in their schools. In this way, the process of the target language acquisition will return to them to get a better future (Loan, 2022).

Learners with unique characteristics have an engagement with the cultural norm in which most of the community members develop a unique way to appreciate others and express their ideas. In this case, teachers and learners are parts of a learning community within a unique cultural background in which they are related to particular language norms (Rashid et.al., 2023). Such circumstance supports the unique characteristic that is different from English native speakers' world in EFL classrooms.

In the context of Islamic school, learners prefer to learn Arabic seriously as the language that supports their perspectives. In this case, they find that Arabic is used every time they are engaged in Islamic studies class. This condition strengthens their identity as Muslim students where they develop characteristics in their English classroom as members of a unique group (Zarrinabadi and Khajeh, 2023).

Related to how the language gives information about the identity of the speakers, learners exhibit unique forms of communication based on their socio-cultural dimension that allows them to communicate with peers in a particular community (Zarrinabadi and Khajeh, 2023). This situation is caused by their experiences as English learners who live in a community that does not use English as a first or second language. Consequently, their point of view on language socialization is influenced by the existing cultural circumstances.

This study is essential in supporting the consideration of curriculum and materials development in English language teaching for students of pesantren-based schools. At the end of the research and its dissemination, it is expected that the learning outcome of English lessons can be achieved in which students are motivated to actively participate in the learning process.

Method

Data are collected from twenty students of the EFL class in the Universitas Sains Al Qur'an Wonosobo. The range of students' age is 19-25 with various levels of proficiency from elementary to intermediate. The observation method is one of the tools used for the data collection process because the research leads to achieving qualitative data that does not involve table and statistical measurement. The second method chosen for this research is qualitative interviews to maintain the good quality of data and to obtain much more information. Another reason is that because the inquiry is about students' feelings the data collection process involves a face-to-face conversation between the researcher and the participants. The second method chosen for this research is qualitative interviews to maintain the good quality of data and to obtain much more information. Thematic analysis is involved in getting the outcome of the study in which the researcher as it requires going back and forth between the entire data set, constantly searching for meaning in patterns. (Christou, 2023).

Finding and Discussion

The first discussion is about the way learners' cultural backgrounds relate to the world and experiences they inhabit in English language learning. The matters related to this sub-topic are cultural identity that goes along with them when they arrive at school, the condition and atmosphere of EFL classroom, the content of materials given by the teachers to the students, initial information by the teacher in the classroom, and the appropriateness of the lesson content with students' cultural identity.

Based on the result of observation, it is exposed that when the students arrive at school they have a paradigm as santri (students) of a pondok pesantren (traditional Islamic boarding school) with its cultural background and identity. Some respondents said

We come to this place is for boarding (mondok) while going to a modern university. Of course, there will be entitlement as a student of pesantren when I go to school, but we have to distinguish the entitlement of pesantren and university (respondent 1)

...at the campus, we are not only looking for knowledge of religion. We are also looking for worldly knowledge. There should be a balance among both of them. We realize that we have to study science as much as possible but we also have to make a limitation...we know that we are students of pesantren. (respondent 3)

It is indicated that learners have a cultural background and identity as pesantren students when they arrive at the EFL course in the university. By mentioning *"there will be entitlement as a student of pesantren when I go to school,..."* by respondent 1 and *"we know that we are students of pesantren"* by respondent 3, it is acknowledged that the identity as a santri (student of pesantren) can not be avoided along with the consequences. It points out that the status of santri is attached to them as an acknowledgement by the community. On the other hand, the cultural background and identity as santri do not influence the need to join the class other than religion class. This is shown by the statement *"but we also have to distinguish which one is the pesantren and which one is the university"* and another statement *"but...if we only get knowledge of religion at school, we also need to explore the knowledge other than Islamic studies"* (respondent 1).

It is identified that both respondents have a strong need to be involved in the curriculum implementation designed by the university under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Culture. This respondent has understood that English as a general course is a common thing and is not a thing that should be avoided. Even from respondent 2, the researcher obtains information that is firmly attached to the cultural background of themselves as boarding school students *"... We live in pesantren, but we can also think formally as other modern students ... so ... we do not want to lose to another campus"*. This indicates that respondents' way of thinking is more firmly in distinguishing identity as pesantren students and modern university students. These respondents want the same thing obtained by students in public schools.

Related to the condition or atmosphere of English class, the respondents indicated that there is a difference between the conditions of English lessons at the university with when they were in pesantren as expressed by respondents 3 below.

The situation of learning in the classroom is different from the learning in the boarding school. In the pesantren usually students only listen to the teacher. In the English classroom, I think, the students participate actively. (respondent 3)

There is a significant difference presented by this respondent, that is when in the pesantren the students do not have the desire to be active as happened in the classroom that does allow this. This shows that they have a strong desire to connect their world with their needs in the future.

Related to the content of the material and the preliminary information given by English teachers about the content material to be provided, it can be identified that the student has obtained preliminary information about the

materials to be obtained by students. Thus they do not experience surprising things when the process of learning takes place, as stated by respondent 3 below.

"I think it's no problem...even it will improve our insights...even though we are santri but what's wrong of being able to speak English...it's all right if it is for improving our insight...." (respondent 3)

This respondent is not affected by the contents of the materials provided by the teacher though it is not designed by a group of teachers in the school. This shows that the student can distinguish their identity as a santri and as a student. Thus she can take a significant benefit in achieving her learning goals. It is also related to the suitability of the subject matter content of the English language in school with her cultural identity as a santri where the learner does not assume that how the material does not match her identity is a problem. It is precisely the thing that she can adjust herself to the cultural world that she learns in boarding schools.

In my opinion, whether it is suitable to my identity or not, if it is about language, from the beginning until now has been developed. But sciences and knowledge have one root, so in the pesantren and the campus, I think it's the same, so it's no problem. (respondent 4)

This information shows that this student has no problem with the English lessons she experiences at the university if it is inappropriate for her identity. Even from her statement, *"...sciences and knowledge have one root..."*, she has come to a comprehensive understanding that there is no dichotomy between science obtained from pesantren and the one acquired from her EFL course. Her understanding of English supports this as an international language that must be mastered for the investment for the future as said by the following respondent.

As a santri, we also need knowledge other than religion studies...It is for improving our insights because we have ever heard that English is an international language, and it will be for our future. (respondent 2)

From the description above, it can be identified that students have been able to distinguish how to put themselves to the cultural identity as santri and as student who must face the era of globalization where English proficiency is a must. In this case, it is clear that as santri, the students are not affected by the content that is not in accordance with the pesantren culture as expressed by respondent 5 below.

As long as I become a student, becoming a santri does not influence the faculty's lessons because worldly science and divine knowledge should be in balance. If knowledge in pesantren is like the soul, science at school is like the body. So, they support each other. As students of pesantren and school, we have to participate actively in both places.
(respondent 5)

The respondent stated that she had no problem with the knowledge learned at the pesantren which can not be separated from those studied in school. This shows the awareness of the obligation to integrate these two types of learning to get more results.

In conjunction with the enthusiasm of the students who join the learning activity in the EFL classroom, the next analysis is on the identification that the students are not affected by the subject matter of the English language that is not tailored to the cultural identity of the students behind them. This is revealed by the observation conducted by the researcher towards active participation of students in the English classroom. In these observations, the students can attend classes without being influenced by the examples that are very different from the typical Islamic boarding school like when teachers convey Western culture and freedom, for example, about the activity at the bar with the smell of alcohol and intimate dating culture in any place. In this condition, the students do not feel awkward about the content, but they realize that it was not supposed to be in their cultural environment. For them, it's just an example of such a culture as a reference to know more about how to communicate with the native English user community. This is confirmed by the statement of the respondent 4 below:

I think it's not contradictory because when we seek knowledge we must be able to adapt. If at boarding school, we learn the science of the hereafter, while in school we learn the science of the world.
(respondent 4)

This respondent indicates that santri can adapt to the dynamics that occur outside of their cultural world, the Islamic world which is closely related to the prevention of contradictory discourses. Respondent 4 in the above statement indicates that the subject matter of secular English which is full of Westernized world nuances does not make them freely resign to continue studying the English language.

Based on observations made in the classroom, there are indications that the students can adapt naturally to the material that has a different point of view with which they have learned as santri. This suggests that the enthusiasm in the process of English language acquisition in students is not affected by the identity

of the target language culture which is different from the language of their culture. This is also reflected in a statement made by respondent 7 about Valentine's Day which is only found in Christian culture and the Western world.

... we'll adjust, sir, if there is such a reading, but it's back again to us whether it is right or wrong. So we can control ourselves, for example, if something is wrong based on our opinion but other people think it's right, then it only becomes a text reading. (respondent 7)

From this respondent, it can be interpreted that the students with the identity of santri can filter sensitive matters of knowledge and norms according to which they get in the pesantren. This indicates that the student has been able to build an understanding of how to adapt to and respect other communities as opposed to their uniqueness. Instead of rejecting the material, something that is done by the students with the unique characteristics of this community is trying to adjust to the world of reality that is in front of them. With this tolerance, they are trying to build a flexible understanding to facilitate the English language acquisition process along with the adaptation of the accompanying culture.

On the other hand, with their different cultural background, students also realize that they must be involved in English lessons actively because in the future they will probably use it related to their careers, as presented by one of the following respondents.

I think not, because we do not know in the future if we're going to be in a certain place. So if later on we go abroad we are not confused because it was taught in our lessons, ... so it helped with English lessons from the English course. (respondent 6)

Related to the way English teachers saw their students who have a distinctive identity, the respondents agreed that teachers should be able to distinguish the context of lessons that they were following. In this case, the teacher should put the students as English language learners, so that whatever they receive is not to be connected with their cultural background as students of a pesantren. Thus, the English language learners in addition to gaining language skills, at the same time also gain knowledge about the cultural background of the target language.

Concerning learners' cultural conceptualization in their first language acquisition that contributes to English language learning the study has found that the use of the concept of indigenous culture of students by teachers in teaching English in the classroom motivates students to involve themselves actively in learning activities. Appropriate adjustments to the use of the concept of culture

make it easy for teachers to engage with students. It can be identified from the following statement of the respondent 2.

If it does, to be honest: yes. Suppose some lecturers have a background from outside the pesantren and never knew the pesantren's delivery is slightly different from pesantren's teacher... it affects me in learning, I might be more comfortable with teachers who have a background of pesantren... because they have a better understanding of our conditions. (respondent 2)

Based on respondent 2 in the above statement, it can be identified that the use of the concept of pesantren culture has a significant influence over the emergence of student comfort in following the flow of thought and discourse as well as practices that exist in the pesantren environment. With the existing convenience, the students find it much easier to interact with the lecturers who have the same concept of culture. In this case, the teacher is expected to have a common vision with students whose background are santri.

Regarding the teaching materials provided, students prefer to avoid all the material related to their lives in the pesantren which should have a variety of topics. This was disclosed by the respondent 3 below.

Probably, not all the material should be related to pesantren, it could be replaced a little because we also want to know about the outside world. (respondent 3)

This statement shows that as learners in formal educational institutions, students also want the same treatment as students from other universities that are not pesantren-based. The treatment implied is the existence of general knowledge and the existing modernization outside the pesantren environment, as stated by respondent 3 below.

At pesantren, we were taught English as well. If our English lesson is full of topics about pesantren, so later we do not know about the outside world as well. (respondent 3)

The expression of respondent 3 given above illustrates the need for students to have greater knowledge than that obtained from her pesantren. The student wants the wider knowledge she gets from the public higher education institution, although still remains in the culture of the pesantren environment. Thus, the acquisition of material should not be limited by the cultural conceptualization of pesantren without involving changes that occur outside of the cultural environment of the students mentioned above. It is also reinforced by respondents 9 and 10 who do not agree when all the material given in English lessons entirely contains about pesantren.

... there should be topics about matters outside religion studies, so it will not be boring. (respondent 9)

...I think, it tends to give us only one subject matter. I mean, we'll get two subjects, pesantren and modern university,.... (respondent 10)

From the second statement of the respondent, it can be identified that implementation of the conceptualization of culture in English classes does not need to be done to the reading materials given to the students. The reason is that students feel separated from the outside world which prepares them to be able to face the possibilities that exist in the world of reality.

Related to the teaching which gives effect to students' motivation in the application of the pesantren cultural concept in EFL classroom, there is an opinion that comes from the following respondent.

... If for example in the pesantren we have been taught about the pesantren knowledge, the EFL course is still in touch with everyday life, so you can make conversation. When in the classroom we were also taught about pesantren again, eventually we got tired. (respondent 4)

The respondent shows that students of a pesantren-based university that are also santri of pesantren have a consciousness to recognize the development outside their cultural environment. As mentioned by respondent 3 *"...so later we do not know about the outside world as well."* It is identified that the need to be part of the global environment becomes a must. On the other hand, students also need to get variation in learning and acquisition of the English language both in pesantren and at the EFL course, as expressed by the respondents 4. *"When in the classroom we were also taught about pesantren again, eventually we got tired."* (respondent 4).

Conclusion

From the research done about the cultural background of English language learners with the background of these pesantren-based students, it can be concluded that learners' cultural background in Universitas Sains Al Qur'an can relate the world and experiences they inhabit to English language learning. In this case, the learners have been able to make adjustments to the culture which was originally a santri of pesantren into modern university students who are faced with the challenge of globalization. Moreover, there is an involvement of learners'

cultural background in stimulating learners' enthusiasm towards the target language that results in the achievement of EFL learning outcomes. Additionally, incorporating cultural conceptualization in the learners' mother language does not affect the teaching and learning activities in English lessons. The respondents prefer to comprehend knowledge about different cultural concepts of their experiences in pesantren.

Based on these results, the researchers suggested that the EFL lecturers of universities in the pesantren environment continue to explicitly describe cross-cultural understanding. Advice is also given to the authors of textbooks in EFL lessons that will be used by higher education institutions in the pesantren environment. It is better to display a description of the cultural background of the target language to disseminate the traditions and customs that a community of language target has maintained. To policymakers, the researcher submits a suggestion to continue to provide opportunities that convey the cultural identity of the target language in the EFL lessons so that the students do not experience culture shock when they meet certain conditions in the future.

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