

THE BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF TWO ENGLISH LEARNERS FROM KUANTAN SINGINGI RIAU

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Abstract

This paper reports a biographic enquiry of two tertiary English learners from Kuantan Singingi Riau and seeks to capture the developmental processes of the learners' language learning approaches. By sharing their past language learning experiences, the two learners verbalized their struggles in language learning and revealed the deep impact that their learning settings had on their perceptions of self and language learning. Their adopted learning approaches, as revealed in their biographical accounts, seem to be extremely exam-oriented and are dependent on the learners' self-will and effort as well as teachers' support and attention. Both learners' accounts suggest that their language learning approaches are influenced by the contextual discourses about learning English, stressful social processes and a sense of threatened self-identity as English major graduates in a highly competitive educational context.

Key words: language learning approaches, biographic study and tertiary English learners

A. Introduction

In this paper, two English learners' (Rinda and Dinda, pseudonyms) learning experiences illustrated how particular learning contexts and social processes pushed them to adopt highly school-based learning approaches and be dependent on teachers in an extremely competitive learning process. The learners were selected out of a larger and undergoing learners' biographical enquiry for reporting because they were an unusual pair of learners. Both learners went to SMK (secondary vocational schools) and were granted opportunities to study at an English Study Program by the local government in Pekanbaru. They were, apparently close friends, always appeared together in and outside of classrooms, but both complained about isolation in learning yet neither of them was willing to form an alliance with each other. Moreover, Rinda was a high-profile learner with glittering academic record, but Dinda was an under-achieving one with little academic achievement. In the following sections, the study and the participants were firstly illustrated before moving on to present two learning biographies based on the learners' own narratives. Then, the important themes and issues were highlighted from the biographies for analysis. Finally, the report was closed with some reflections on how the two learners' stories are able to inform teachers and researchers interested in the same field.

B. The Study

The enquiry concerning two learners' experiential learning accounts inform us about the developmental process of their language learning approaches across various educational settings.

1. Research Participants and Setting

Rinda and Dinda were two third-year students from the English Language Department at a Teacher Training and Education Faculty in Pekanbaru. The faculty admits graduates from secondary vocational schools or regular high schools, who would never become tertiary students without due to one and another reason. Characteristic of such type of faculty was that more students come from rural and low-income families, where they receive less educational and financial resources to support their learning, have fewer further educational opportunities and bleaker employment prospects than their counterparts in urban centers or high-profile universities. However, they probably represent the majority of English learners in schools of Kuantan Singingi Regency.

2. Data-Collection

Interviews were used to collect the informants' English language learning history since many researchers have found interviews particularly helpful to capture learners' voices and enhance our understanding of their learning reality (Benson, forthcoming; Block, 1998; Gao et al, 2002). There were two rounds of interview: the first interview, lasting about 45 minutes, was loosely semi-structured and engaged the learners in sharing their English learning past. The second interviews lasted about 20-25 minutes and were about specific issues

revealing interesting cases after initial readings of the transcript of the first interviews. Both rounds of interview were in Bahasa Indonesia and recorded on tapes for later verbatim transcription and analysis.

3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed following the basic operations in a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998): asking questions and making comparisons. Essential to the process of analyzing data are the questions guiding my investigation. In order to undertake the analysis procedures, I was particularly informed by Layder's (1993) research resource map. The learners' statements concerning learners themselves and the situated activity (English learning) at institutional settings in the macro social context were analyzed. The statements related to 'social settings' were further divided into those about peer-to-peer, student-to-teacher, and student-to-school relationships, as recommended by Benson and Voller (1997) and Oxford (2001). I repeatedly compared answers to these guiding questions and clustered them according to different educational settings they had been through: junior middle schools (including any early English language learning activities), senior middle schools and the college. These steps helped me to establish answers to the central research questions:

What are particularly significant features of two learners' language learning approaches?

What has influenced the learners' English learning approaches in particular settings?

C. Learning Biographies

Before I describe what the students' learning stories can inform us of in relation to the research questions, I shall present their learning biographies to pave the ground for analyzing their learning experiences.

1. Rinda's Learning Story

1.1 In the Beginning

Rinda grew up in a small town and was sent to a private English tutor in her last year at primary school by her mother. She did not particularly like English in the beginning. However, after she started attending English classes at junior middle school, she found that she had advantages over other students in learning English. I was able to answer questions asked by English teacher at middle school because I had learnt them all before. My quick answers left a deep impression on my English teacher. From then on, she paid a lot of attention to me and always praised my performance. Therefore, I felt that I could do well in English. Teachers' attention and praises were crucial to her because they kept motivating her in learning English. The more praise I got from my teachers, the more interested I became in learning English. Without their attention and praise, I would not do well in learning English.

In her final year at middle school, she had a new English teacher. He required his students to read loudly the words in a vocabulary list from A to Z every morning but he forgot on which section of the list his students had finished reading in the previous reading sessions. Rinda and her classmates were alarmed by the fact that they kept repeating themselves everyday while the school-leaving exam was around the corner. So they decided to rebel against the teacher's instructions and read the vocabulary list in their own way. This particular incident marked the beginning of her effort to manage her own English learning, as she recalled:

I started learning English in my own way gradually although I was not totally aware of it. [...] I just knew that it was boring to listen to the teacher and I liked to read what I was interested in. In the end, I borrowed grammar exercise books myself and worked on mock tests.

1.2 At Secondary Technical School

At secondary technical school, she met a teacher who had graduated from a prestigious university in Pekanbaru and spoke English with a 'perfect' accent. In the first semester, she and her classmates did not learn anything except how to pronounce twenty-six English alphabetical letters. The teacher told her that she could learn other things easily if she could pronounce the letters accurately. The teacher also spent a lot of time correcting students' pronunciation. Rinda apparently appreciated highly what the teacher had taught her.

The way she taught us English pronunciation will benefit me for the whole life. Upon my entrance to the school, she taught us how to study on our own. I still feel highly indebted to her and grateful for having a teacher like her.

She did seem to have learnt a lot from the teacher, particularly about how to learn English. We may notice that she took a similar approach to improve her grammar.

After a semester's learning (which was all about pronunciation), I felt that I forgot all the grammar and knew nothing about grammar. I then discovered a book called 'The Ultimate Grammar' (for the

Beginners)' and read it from the first page to the last page. I felt that I improved my grammatical knowledge by doing so. Later, I even went to buy the same grammar book for intermediate learners.

But why did she have such persistence for learning English in such an apparently stressful way? It was partly related to the fact that she had close access to the teacher as a student leader, which gave her a sense of responsibility for learning more English than others.

I was then the liaison student between the teacher and the whole class. If the teacher asked a question and nobody was able to answer it, including me, I would be surely reprimanded by her. I had to learn more because my teacher and classmates expected me to do so. [...] It was stressful. I do not want to say that I liked this kind of life. But there was no better choice, I guess.

1.3 At College

She chose to take tertiary education in Business English because her mother argued that Indonesia's inevitable entry to the World Trade Organization would bring more English-related jobs. After entering the college, she found that she had more time for self-study and teachers were less involved in students' language learning. She felt quite lost in the beginning but she quickly began to value the independence.

The society after my graduation is a big classroom, where I will have many things to learn. If I follow my teachers' instructions to walk every step, or I only do what my teachers tell me to do, I will be in an awkward situation in the future. After all, I have to rely on myself in the future.

She welcomed opportunities to discuss with her classmates about problems in learning but she could have such conversations with very few people. The class in the college, unlike classes in secondary schools, was no longer a closely bound collective group any more.

Although we belong to the same class, without close relationship, it is unlikely for me to discuss study matters with my classmates. [...] Besides, we all lived in different dormitories. [...] Even in the same dormitory, we tend to split up in smaller groups of twos or threes. [...] There was little communication among the classmates. Therefore, I do not fully understand what are on other people's minds.

The relationship between her and her fellow students became worse on occasions, such as winning a scholarship competition or student leaders' election. She talked about the consequences of competition among the classmates for scholarship:

Competition caused fissures in our relationship. [...] If someone got the first scholarship and others got none, the way that they look at you will be different. I did not know and did not try to know what they thought about me.

As a result, she felt a bit lonesome and wanted to be understood. In order to solve these problems, she was active in seeking the teachers' advice and suggestions and would even go to consult psychiatrists in the college, which was quite rare among students. After passing the College English Test (CET) Band 6, one of the key national English tests, she lost a prime motivating learning target and wondered what to do next. Meanwhile, she had been asking herself many times how she could prove that she had better English as an English major graduate.

I have passed the CET-6 and now I felt like a ship without sailing directions. I feel lost in learning. [...] I have been always asking myself: "how much English have I learnt? Is it enough for me to have CET-4 and -6 scores?" For graduates in accounting majors, they specialize in accounting at least. They also had CET-4 results. But what and how well have we, English major graduates, specialized in? I cannot answer this question.

Then she decided to take another test to improve her oral competency. But she could not find someone who shared similar learning objectives to work with her on enhancing communicative competence in English.

It is a problem in the learning environment. Some students are motivated in learning English but not all of us are. Maybe some students feel lonely in learning, too. Because we do not have much communication, it is difficult for us to form learning collaboration.

Therefore, she believed that the college should take measures to promote English learning on the campus, including establishing a campus English radio, requiring all the students and staff from the English Department to speak English, organizing English debates or speech contests, and setting up English learning places like self-access centers.

At the same time, she had developed a highly quantitative learning approach (Benson & Lor, 1999). When asked on what occasions she felt that she had improved in learning English, her initial responses were directly related to vocabulary and phrases.

As an obvious example, I tried to memorize a word before and the word appeared in a book or my teachers' lectures. I had some knowledge about that word but its re-appearance deepened my understanding of this word. I feel that I have learnt something. It is the same with a phrase. [...] I could not think of other scenarios at the moment.

2. Dinda's Learning Story

2.1 In the Beginning

Growing up in countryside, Dinda described her start in learning English at a countryside middle school:

Very few students in my class were interested in learning English because my school was in the countryside. But at that time, I cannot say that I liked English, I just felt so much interested in learning English. I did not work very hard at all. Only for exams, I worked a little bit. Then I always got decent scores.

Then one of her middle school English teachers took an interest in her and believed that she had potential for further improvement. He gave her special tuition to improve her learning methods, gave her extra exercises to work on, and recommended good test-preparation books to her. Somehow Dinda disappointed the teacher by choosing not to respond to his 'favoer' with extra learning efforts.

But I did not fully understand why I had to do these. Maybe I was not fully motivated to learn English or I was too young to (make decisions). I thought my English was OK, if not excellent. [...] I did not keep pursuing it. [...] Had I persisted in doing more exercises, my English would not have been that terrible.

As a result, she soon found that she slowly fell behind others in later years at the middle school. The second teacher she met at the same school had a boring classroom teaching style. Facing the school-leaving exam, he kept giving endless exam exercises to his students.

It was all about exams. He didn't teach what we were interested in. [...] He tried to cram into your head. Exercises, exercises. And exercises were all about grammar. [...] We felt so bored with his teaching. [...] It was not unusual for some boys to get single-digit-grades in exams.

2.2 At Secondary Technical School

Entering secondary technical school, she felt a strong urge to take a rest after going through a year of intense exam preparation activities. The school had a relaxing atmosphere and teachers there did not interfere with students' learning. English teachers at the school often had teaching duties in other schools and had to leave right after they finished teaching.

They (teachers) might routinely ask whether we had any questions. Sometimes, they did not even bother to ask. We had few opportunities to talk to them. [...] I was then only seventeen or eighteen and did not have strong self-control. [...] I felt that I did not have to work hard. [...] My teachers did not make us work hard as well. She took the opportunity to have some fun until she realized that she would graduate with limited English skills from the technical school.

After two years, [...] I did not learn anything. [...] I did not think that I had acquired any professional skills. At that time, I was also an English major student at the technical school. My English was so bad that I could not possibly find any work. So I had to do further education.

So she decided to take State University Entrance Test like many others in the same school. The school organized a special class and assigned a responsible teacher for them. The teacher tried her best to boost their morale for test-preparation. In the end, she did manage to pass the exam and went to the college.

The teacher worked very hard so we might go to university. [...] She was afraid that we were not motivated enough so she organized class-meetings everyday. [...] Because she had a tight control of our learning, I started realizing that I had to work hard, too. [...] She also told us that we could have choices on matters such as where we could go for further education, only after we had good scores in the coming exam.

2.3 At College

At college, she had more time to study by herself and remained a low-profile learner. She appreciated that some pedagogic activities, such as classroom drama performance, helped to increase students' courage in speaking English in public. However, on many occasions, she experienced more failures than successes and became even less willing to speak English.

After all, we all have some sense of pride in ourselves. [...] I felt so nervous that I had to stutter. Later on, I lost my confidence in speaking in English. [...] I can remain silent in class. It is my right to do so.

The peer relationship had been often quite stressful with little communication between her and her classmates before and after she came to the college. The teamwork projects promoted by some teachers might encourage them to exchange ideas among team members but it was often difficult for her and her classmates to accomplish anything because different team members might have different ideas in dealing with tasks or have different interests at stake. Consequently, Dinda normally preferred tasks with clearly specified instructions from teachers.

We are all concerned with our own interest. If it does not matter to our own interest, we would not be motivated to do anything. [...] It is better for teachers to assign roles to us clearly in the project or give us

individual work. Meanwhile, she had developed a strong desire for success. She visualized how she would feel a sense of achievement in learning:

Sometimes, when answering teachers' questions, [...] I do not have to translate from Bahasa Indonesia into English. [...] I can just stand up and answer their questions. [...] I consider this as progress in my learning. However, her visualized success seldom happened. Meanwhile, she developed a quite extreme conceptualization of learning achievement.

When we (and my classmates) are talking about something and I find that I know something that they do not know, I feel that I have learnt something. She also thought that it was 'a great loss' to her if she could not prove she had better English than other degree or diploma graduates. That is why she regarded it 'a political necessity' for her to pass the CET-6 test after passing the CET-4 test, one of the graduation requirements at the college.

She firmly believed that she was responsible for failures in her language learning but she trusted that she had the ability to learn English and optimize learning resources available at learning sites. I do not think that I am particularly bad in learning or have lesser capacity for learning English than others. It is impossible! I just didn't work hard enough. [...] I cannot blame atmosphere, facilities or environment. I did not try myself.

Although she assumed responsibilities for her own learning failures, she complained loudly that she had received little attention and support from her teachers in the past. She thought that she had been invisible to them most of the time. It was always like this. [...] You know, schools and teachers always pay much attention to good students. They always neglect some students, particularly those in the middle, like me. If you are still able to catch with others and do not pose serious problems, you will be neglected. In her perception, a teacher still had important roles in students' language learning. In addition to promoting independent learning skills among learners, a teacher should encourage us to get used, for example, to an opened teaching style. They should help us to get used to it gradually. A teacher should try to create strong desires for learning among learners.

Meanwhile, she hoped that the college could help to make it a more legitimate thing to speak English on the campus since her fellow students would normally look at her differently if she spoke English. Because it was not easy for her to find a collaborative learning partner, she chose to prepare for the English test alone.

D. Analysis and Discussion

To some extent, the language learning experiences of Rinda and Dinda epitomize many English learners' struggles with learning English in similar educational settings. Based on their accounts, their adopted learning approaches seem to be highly exam-oriented and contingent on individual learners' will and effort. At the same time, they voiced their expectations of teachers' participation in their learning process. Further analysis indicates that their seemingly contradictory inclinations to be self-reliant and teacher-dependent appear to be complicated by the contextual discourses about learning English, a tense peer relationship and threatened identities as English major graduates from a low-ranking institution.

1. Characteristics of Two Learners' Language Learning Approaches

Exam-orientedness is the most salient feature of two learners' learning approaches. Exams were initially imposed by the educational system onto them early in their educational experiences. The learners attached increasing importance to exams as they became fully aware that exams provided a means of competition for them to move upward in the educational hierarchy to gain better access to higher positions in the social hierarchy. Two learners seemed to have different attitudes towards examination in the beginning of their English learning careers. While Rinda appeared to pursue better results more actively to secure honours and teachers' support in learning, Dinda was not particularly motivated to achieve better grades in English exams even though an English teacher at middle school offered her special assistance. After they came to the college, both of them seemed to be more than willing to use exams as 'authoritative' tools to define their achieved language proficiency and 'objective' goals to upgrade their Rindauistic knowledge (Shohamy, 2000). As a result, Rinda's language learning focused on accumulation of discrete Rindauistic knowledge, such as vocabulary and phrases, while Dinda wished to take delight at learning that she had outsmarted her classmates although she rarely succeeded.

One of the consequences of such an exam-oriented learning approach is that learners conceive learning as cognitive activities involving memorization and reproduction of discrete knowledge. For them, learning has to be sustained and enhanced at all cost and contingent on individual learners' self-will and efforts. For Rinda, her personal experiences had proven it as a truth that one could achieve good learning (exam) results if one was committed to this end. For Dinda, in contrast to successful learners within reach like Rinda, she felt that she was a proven case of failure due to the fact that she put too little effort into

conscientious learning. Both learners seemed to be convinced that a strong will and intensive effort were crucial to learning (exam) results. However, if we fully subscribe to their conviction, we would have a blurred understanding of the reality. In fact, they have revealed, by telRinda their learning stories, that many other factors, such as unequal access to learning resources and different learning settings, might have also affected their learning and learning (exam) achievements.

Furthermore, they both voiced explicitly dependence on teachers, although this did not seem to negate the importance of learners' self-will and efforts as well as their growing sense of responsibility for their own learning. We often have an impression that good and autonomous learners require little involvement from teachers in their language learning. However, in fact, Rinda, the apparently more autonomous learner, solicited more help and received more attention from teachers than Dinda ever did. Meanwhile, neither learner expressed a desire to be spoon-fed by teachers. What they wanted teachers to do was something related to the emotional and affective aspects of language learning or learning in general, which included sharing their learning problems, offering guidance in learning, fostering the capacity for autonomous learning, and enhancing motivation for learning. If necessary, they also wanted teachers to be disciplinary forces coercing them into making intense learning efforts for high-stake exams.

2. Language Learning Approaches Under Constraints

The learners' biographical accounts provide a unique opportunity for us to understand reasons why two learners adopted such learning approaches, the social context in which their English learning took place, the socialization processes that affected their language learning paths as well as how they perceived themselves as English learners at particular learning sites. Each of these aspects—the social context, socialization processes, and the learners' identity development will be explored in turn in the following sections.

2.1 Social Context

The learners' discourses about learning English language were often linked to future employment, reflecting popular conceptualizations of education as a way to social and economic mobility, and English proficiency as a gatekeeper controlling access to material and social capital (Cheng, 1996, cited in Cheah, 1998; Pennycook, 1994; Yang, 2002; Zhao & Campbell, 1995). In the learners' learning context, English proficiency was often equal to high-stake English exam scores. Both learners knew that they needed better exam grades or more certificates in English to secure further educational or job opportunities. Therefore, they could only choose ways of learning English from those helping to achieve successful exam results. The social context did not provide other alternatives, at least in the learners' perceptions.

2.2 Socialization (Peer) Process

The second issue emerging from their learning experiences is the stressful peer relationships, fragmentary social fabric, and feeling of alienation among language learners, which often undermined their effort to organize effective language learning collaboration. Unfortunately, in many cases (e.g. Ross, 1993; Turner & Acker, 2002), 'harmony' may not be the best word to describe social processes among Kuansing learners. In the last two decades, Indonesia's educational system has institutionalized tertiary students' competition for better exam grades and performance-based academic awards under the name of 'promoting better learning' while Kuansing students' pre-tertiary learning has traditionally been fiercely competitive (Turner & Acker, 2002; Yang, 2002). As an aftermath of such a competitive and exam-oriented learning process, the relationship among Kuansing students can be stressful and inhibitive against learners' learning collaboration and cooperation. In both learners' accounts, it becomes quite difficult for them to have effective learning cooperation/collaboration without teachers' intervention. As a result, both Rinda and Dinda expected institutions and teachers to accomplish what they had failed to achieve as individual learners, for instance, creating a better learning environment, or promoting English learning on the campus and so on.

2.3 Identity Crisis

The third issue arising from their stories is that the two learners seemed to have an identity crisis. Being English major graduates from a tertiary vocational institution, both learners feared that their identity as English major learners was compromised by major and non-major graduates from other institutions of higher ranking. In the first place, they were in disadvantageous positions in comparison with other university graduates upon their graduation because of their achieved academic level and institutional reputation (Shen & Li, 2004, p.75). Secondly, there has been a national craze for learning English. For instance, Gu (2003) found his research participants spent much more time on learning English than any other subjects even though they were not English major students. The learners were aware that many university or college graduates from other academic fields had an advantage over English major graduates due to their professional expertise in their specialized fields in addition to well-documented English language competency in terms of standard test scores. Consequently, the learners felt that they were pushed to take more and more exams to prove that they were better English achievers.

E. Conclusion

The paper describes two Kuansing learners' language learning experiences, revealing the deep impact that their learning context and sites had on their conceptualization of language learning and self. Their adopted learning approaches, as revealed in their biographical accounts, seem to be extremely exam-oriented and dependent on learners' self-will and effort as well as teachers' support and attention. Their stories demonstrate a particular variety of language learning experiences for Kuansing learners. Together with those told about Kuansing English learners by other researchers (e.g. Gu, 2003; He, 2003; Lam, 2003), their stories suggest that there is a range of social processes and material conditions shaping Kuansing English learners' English learning at different learning sites. More than often, we, as language teachers or researchers, cannot solve (significant/major) social issues for our learners. However, perhaps through listening to learners' stories, we may help to alleviate these learners' anxiety and frustrations, reduce the intensity of competition, and tactfully reorient them towards successful collaborative/cooperative learning activities. Furthermore, their stories also give us opportunities to reflect on how much effort we have to invest into developing learners to become more autonomous and whether in fact we can afford to make such investment in particular learning contexts such as the institution reported in this study.

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