

When EFL Students Study English Abroad in a Non-English Speaking Country: A Study of Thai Students in Learning English in Indonesia

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Abstract. Study Abroad (SA) has been discussed vastly in myriad of studies in the context of English as a Foreign Language. However, the discussions have been mostly around the context of countries where English is spoken as the first language while, SA is also prominently held in countries where English is a foreign language. The current study aims to investigate a particular program of SA in which students learn English in a non-English speaking country and are enrolled in an English Study Program. The study employs a case study. The participants are four Thai students enrolled in English Department of Southern Private University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The interview was used as the method to gather the data. The findings revealed that Thai students find studying English in Indonesia as a non-English speaking country challenging. The barriers concern language of instruction, custom, and social interaction. The findings of the study implies that SA students should be equipped with the language used in the target country with adequate training and preparation.

1 Introduction

The popularity of study abroad (SA) is blooming in the recent decades when the growth of information and technology significantly changes the people's perspectives to learn new knowledge. International cooperation through bilateral networking between two countries has become a new mode for students to go abroad especially for studying foreign languages. In Indonesia, for instance, as of 2022, there are around 3000 private universities and around 150 public universities accepted international students in their campuses with the supervision from The Ministry of Education and Culture (AECC, 2023).

SA becomes students' preferred way to learn a second or foreign language. It provides them both ideal formal education which provides them with native speaker teachers, and abundant opportunities for language exposure outside classroom context (Collentine 2009;

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Freed1995). It is also probably because SA seems to provide students with authentic material, as well as unlimited language input that students can access. It is also proved that SA is positive for students especially to the development of their oral skills (Collentine 2009; Llanes 2011).

Learning English is best done by learners in countries in which English is the first language. United States, England, and Australia are among countries in which English is used as L1. Studying English there is the best way as the countries provide students with ideal context of English learning. It is because students will get native speakers of English as their teachers and also numerous opportunities to get authentic materials of English outside the classroom. Countries where English is L2 become less ideal as place to learn English as its limited access to authentic material and also native English teacher. The least ideal context is by studying English in non-English speaking countries in which English is foreign language and only learned in schools without any usage in daily conversation. It happens when students learn English abroad in a country in which English is as foreign language (e.g. Indonesian student with L2 English studying in Japan or Spain). Among few studies in this area is Kaloscai's (2014) which has similar context of study.

SA provides greater opportunity to students for more access to use language learned as means of communication in both social and interpersonal interactions (Nam, 2018). It enables students to really implement what they have learned to a real world situation in which the language is really used in the current context. This opportunity is either less or not available in L2 and EFL context. Moreover, experiences obtained by students in SA are believed to be an ideal language learning context for them. As some studies report (see Allen 2013; Duff 2007; Hernandez 2010; Kang 2014; Mora and Valls-Ferrer 2012; and Yang and Kim 2011), SA benefits students for its effects on their language development. Students develop considerable improvement to their language proficiency as a result of its numerous exposures of authentic language input from the environment. On another note, studies have also found that SA students experienced various struggles during their program related to the different aspects between languages and cultures used in the home and host countries (see Chien, 2020; Hibatullah, 2019; Mardiningrum & Larasati, 2021).

Nam (2018) also reported that SA in non-English speaking country has resulted both negative and positive effect. On the negative side, SA in this context forced students to experience English learning by attending formal classes. The problem occurs when the language used as the instruction involve third language in which it adds more difficulties to the students. On the positive side, learning English in this context gained confidence in using English through the process of using English in figure out immediate problems and group assignments. The confidence occurs as a result of the necessity of the students to overcome any problems related to their learning difficulties. Nam further suggested that students should prepare their language competence of the target country prior before going to non-English speaking countries. It will benefit them to have sufficient knowledge and skills to face challenges in the target country.

Most studies on EFL students' experience in SA are in English-speaking countries (e.g. Kang 2014; Sasaki 2007; Tanaka 2007; Tanaka and Ellis 2003; Yang and Kim 2011) and few studies conducted in non-English speaking country (see Hibatullah, Jang, 2018; Mardiningrum & Larasati, 2021; Nam, 2018). Moreover, this study investigate SA as a result of a program between two countries in Asia, particularly Southeast Asia. It is useful to reflect the practice of the program as well as SA in general in the similar context. The study will give insight to the relevant parties, especially those who involved to the program such as students, government, university, teachers, stakeholders, and any related parties on the SA landscape in non-English-speaking countries and Indonesia in particular.

1.1 Ideal Context to learn English

There are many scholarship programs which provide opportunity for foreign students to study in Indonesia. MEDAT is among the scholarship programs in Indonesia. The current study is under the program between Muslim Education Development Association in Thailand (MEDAT) cooperated with one of Islamic private universities in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in providing full-time scholarships. The program enables Thai students to continue their study to higher education in certain universities in Indonesia. The selected universities are in charge to hold a program for international students. A university which has held cooperation with MEDAT is located in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. It is a private Islamic university and has some cooperation to some universities across Asia. Thai students enrolled to the university were in three study programs i.e. Islamic Education, International Relations, and English Language Education.

Among three departments or study programs (English Language Education, International Relation, and Islamic Education) in which the Thai students enroll, this current study investigated only those who enrolled English Language Education Department (ELED). It aims to investigate on Thai students' perception on learning English abroad in non-English speaking country. It was in consideration that the students experienced condition that they have to learn English that is commonly taught by English and Indonesian Language, and both languages are foreign languages toward Thai students.

Specifically all students are native speakers of Thai language, and some of them were able to speak Malay which is quite similar to Bahasa Indonesia. In learning English, they deal with two languages used in teaching and learning process i.e. English and Bahasa Indonesia. No Thai language used in this context as means of instruction and learning process.

Llanes, À., Arnó, E., & Mancho-Barés, G. (2016) stated that SA gains students language skills especially oral fluency, vocabulary, and socio-pragmatic skills. Oral fluency is developed through intensive use of the language as students are required to use the language both during the teaching and learning process, and as means of communication for outside classroom interaction. Vocabulary is gained both in term of size and mastery. Abundant exposure of English is one of the main causes of its effect to the students. SA also provides them chance to apply words and formulate the system of language use. Socio-pragmatic skills are developed by applying the language for social interaction in a real world situation. This provides students to confirm, adjust, or even reformulate the language system what they have learned from classroom. Overall, the benefits of SA is mainly influenced by L1 context in which language is used for any purposes.

Study by Llanes and Munoz (2009) found out that students gain oral language fluency and accuracy in Spanish after short stay abroad. Moreover, Segalowitz and Freed (2004) found that students improved oral fluency and general proficiency after SA. Oral fluency may appear to be the dominant effect that the students get after SA. It may be caused by the opportunities that the students have to build verbal communication especially in social interaction with friends, teacher, or community which is not available in L2 context.

In brief, there is a consensus that students who study abroad need to have a certain level of language threshold first to get optimal benefit of SA. Llanes, À., Arnó, E., & Mancho-Barés, G. (2016) suggested institutions with such program to prepare students for optimal SA experience. The program may include the basic requirements of language skills that students should acquire, at least to make sure that they can survive in the target country with its language. It can also cover the language proficiency which accommodate them to study and do academic activities. It can be a prerequisite for those who will enter and study in the target country.

There are numerous studies on vocabulary acquisition in SA setting. Some studies (Dewey 2008; Serrano, Llanes and Tragant 2011) which found that SA has positive effect on students' lexical improvement. The number of hours of classroom instruction and extensive exposure of L2 are two keys of its consistent influence for vocabulary acquisition (Dewey, 2008).

Llanes, Arnó, and Mancho-Barés (2016) found out that in academic context, SA has significantly gained students general English proficiency and written lexical complexity. It was found that SA benefits students of ability to use English actively during communication as well as improvement for the different forms of lexical features in English.

SA is beneficial for language skills as Keyser (2007) stated that students gain considerable progress on speaking skills through SA (Carlson et al 1991, Golonka 2001, Yager 1998, Allen 2002,), listening (Allen, 2002), reading (Dewey, 2004), and writing (Freed and Lazar 2003) and no writing progress (Freed, 1995).

Some studies reported that SA give significant improvement to the students' English proficiency and it results in positive development of students' L2 even if its SA took place in non-English speaking countries. (Brecht and Robinson 1995; Lapkin, Hart and Swain 1995). The interesting finding was seen in the fact that SA in non-English speaking country is also beneficial to students' language development. It can be inferred that non-English speaking countries also provide students with sufficient exposure of language as well as sufficient opportunity to apply the language.

1.2 Dilemma of International Scholarship Program

Most studies on the effect of SA tend to examine the L2 development in the context in which the language is officially used in the context of study, and socially used in interaction among the people (see Carlson et al., 1998; Dewey, 2004; Freed & Lazar, 2003; Golonka 2001; Mardiningrum, 2017; Yager, 1998).

However, the context of this current study put SA in non-English speaking country i.e. Indonesia where English is as L2 or foreign language. The results of other studies allow for conclusion in their own right, but are not for every perspective. It raises an issue that foreign students especially from Thailand learn English in Indonesia as non-English speaking country which is likely to have different experience to the previous mentioned context.

Studies of SA will be various depending on what aspect to be studies and in what context it was researched. The aspects may involve general language proficiency, specific language skills and also detailed language feature. In addition, the context of SA may involves countries in which English becomes L1, L2 or foreign language. One more thing about what country the students come from may also influence the discrete study of SA toward English.

Most studies of SA were conducted in English speaking countries, and very few studies give overview on SA taken place in non-English speaking county i.e. South East Asian countries (see Hibatullah, Jang, 2018; Mardiningrum & Larasati, 2021; Nam, 2018). Many programs held by cooperation among South East Asian countries will inevitably provide opportunity for students to experience especially studying English in non-English speaking country. The current study challenges such program whether it has positive effect on students' language development. Hence, researcher is interested in investigating the phenomenon of SA done through a program called MEDAT which provide chances for Thai students to study English in Indonesia. The current research formulate the problems through following research questions.

1. What is students' perception in learning English in Indonesia?
2. What are the barriers perceived by Thai students in learning English in Indonesia?

2 Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This current study is a case study which aims to figure out Thai students' perception in learning English in Indonesia. It is under the program of Muslim Education Development Association in Thailand (MEDAT) cooperated with a university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia

2.2. Participants

The participants of the study were four Thai students of an English Education Department of a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The four students were all native speakers of Thai language. They enrolled to the department in 2019 and now they are in fourth semester. All participants are in same batch and joined the same program. All of them regard English and Indonesian Language as foreign languages. There are three female students and one male student. They have been students of ELED for two semesters (one year).

The first student is Anas. He is the only Thai male student in the department. He is from Pattani, southern part of Thailand. He is native speaker of Thai language. Since he lived in the southern part of Thailand, he was able to speak Malay for daily communication.

The second student is Benjanuch. She is from Yatun, Thailand. She is native speaker of Thai language. She is also able to speak Malay. She has been living in Indonesia for four years.

The third student is Asnee. She is from Yala, Thailand. She can only speak Thai language. She has been living in Indonesia for three years. During 3 years of living in Indonesia, she has learnt Bahasa Indonesia through short course and daily conversation.

The fourth student is Tanatporn. She is from Naratiwat, central part of Thailand. She can speak Thai language and Malay. She has been living in Indonesia for about three years. Now she is learning Bahasa Indonesia through daily conversation.

In the English Language Education Department (ELED), English is used in teaching and learning process. Moreover, Bahasa Indonesia is frequently used by teacher to explain further of certain material or communicate to students.

2.3 Instruments

The method to gather data was interview. The current study employed in depth interview as it allows researcher investigates deeper the participants' real-life experiences ((Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The researcher was equipped by interview protocol which contains general interview questions related to the Thai students' experiences in learning English in Indonesia. To accommodate the participants' feeling, opinion, and situation, unstructured response was employed.

In the process of data gathering, the researcher started the procedure by selecting the participants based on certain criteria. First, the participants should be native speaker of Thai. Second, the participants have nationality of Thailand and awardee of MEDAT scholarship program. Third, the participants are not proficient in Bahasa Indonesia. Fourth, the participants were in the first year of study. There were four participants selected.

In conducting the interview, the researcher used English for interview questions and welcomed participants to respond in English, Malay or Indonesian Language. Researcher also employed an interpreter who are proficient in Thai language and Malay to help researcher in conducting the interview.

The instrument used to collect the data of the research was interview guidelines which involve questions about the Thai students' perception in learning English in Indonesia. The guidelines are used to guide researcher in conducting the interview. In conducting interview, researcher added some follow up questions which aim to dig out the data and to maintain the flow of the interview.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis comprises several steps. First, the researcher transcribes that data obtained from interview. The interview transcript is consulted to each participant as part of member checking. It aims to clarify the result of transcription to get the credibility of the data which at the end maintain the trustworthiness. The result indicated that all four participants agreed on the result of the coding, and it proceed the objection. The next step is to code the data based on pre-determined themes.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings show two findings related to the study. The two findings are the answers of the research questions. The first findings are related to (1) Thai students' perception in learning English in Indonesia, and (2) barriers perceived by Thai students in learning English in Indonesia. The elaborated findings and discussion are presented below.

3.1. Thai Students' Perception in Learning English in Indonesia

The first finding shows that in general, Thai students perceived that learning English in Indonesia was challenging. Taking scholarship to learn English in a non-English speaking country was challenging as it requires them to deal with two foreign languages *i.e.* English and Bahasa Indonesia. English is language to be learnt and also means of instruction, while Bahasa Indonesia was used in the communication in the classroom. The finding was represented by statements below.

Anas stated” I know at first that I will have some problems learning English in Indonesia, but I take the risks and I make it as challenge. Some students have done in studying here and I think I can make it too”

Benjanuch claimed “ Before going to Indonesia I already knew that we will also learn Bahasa Indonesia here. It is not a problem for me. I knew it before”

Asnee said “ I think most students from Thailand knew it even before the apply the scholarship, So I think it is not even a problem. In fact, I also learn Bahasa Indonesia here”

Tanatporn stated “ When I hear that I was accepted to study in Thailand, I imagine that there are many new things there and I find it as new experiences”

The four students stated that learning English in Indonesia as non-English speaking country was a challenge as they deal with two foreign language. In addition, the use of two languages affect the way they comprehend the learning. However, two students stated that their acquisition of Malay helped comprehend the communication during teaching and learning process as both languages are in same root. They found that quite many words in

Malay that they knew were similar to those in Bahasa Indonesia. Meanwhile, those who were only acquired Thai language face more challenges and they only count on their limited acquisition of English in comprehending communication during teaching and learning process. Learning English in a non-English speaking country becomes choices for some students through some programs in recent years. The growth of technology becomes consideration for students not to choose an English speaking country to learn English. (Dewey, 2008). Moreover, Keyser (2007) stated that world English becomes a new perspective for students which result in an understanding that English can also be learn outside the countries where it is spoke as first language. In addition, increasing number of English teachers graduated from universities in English speaking countries is also consideration for students to study English in a non-English speaking countries (Allen, 2002).

3.2 Barriers of Thai Students in Learning English in Indonesia

The second finding shows that there are three barriers of learning English in Indonesia as a non-English speaking country. The barriers in the study covered any difficulties Thai students faced in learning English in Indonesia.

The first barrier is related to the language as instruction in the classroom. The language used for instruction in the classroom are English and Bahasa Indonesia. Three students found that the languages used as one of the barriers in learning English as some of them are all not a speaker of both languages.

Anas stated” When teacher uses English, I knew little bit what she explains. But when she uses Bahasa Indonesia, I do not know at all”

Benjanuch claimed “ I really do not understand what teachers explain when they use Bahasa Indonesia in the classroom”

Asnee said “ One of the barriers in Bahasa Indonesia. When teacher use it, I do not know the meaning”

The findings imply that the students found studying English in Indonesia is challenging. It is because they have known the consequence of studying English in a non-English speaking country would have more challenges. Students also have to deal with the native language which was also a foreign language for them, not only English. Kaloscai’s study (2014) found that students find studying English in a non-English speaking country becomes challenges for them to deal with English as subject matter as well as other languages as means of instruction. Moreover, Llanes and Munoz (2009) stated that there is an increasing number of students chose English as major to take in an international scholarship program. Segalowitz and Freed (2004) also argued that students of exchange program prefer choosing major of foreign language as the priority of their study program. This finding is similar to the one found in Hibatullah’s (2019) study where international students studying English in Indonesia struggled with the language of instruction used in classrooms. Language barriers have also been found in Mardiningrum and Larasati’s (2021) study as the source of the students’ culture shock.

The second barrier is related to different custom. Different cultures result in different custom which influences the way they study in Indonesia. Two students stated the finding related to different custom.

Benjanuch claimed “ Sometimes, I feel uncomfortable to be in the classroom because we have different custom. It somehow affect how I learn English in Indonesia”

Tanatporn stated “ It is quite difficult to understand the Indonesian culture as it consists of many cultures in Indonesia. Sometimes it is a bit different to Thailand. I have some misunderstanding in learning English due to different culture”

The different custom influences the interaction of Thai students with their classmates. It result in a gap between their custom to other students custom. Difficulties to interact with other students cause problems in learning English. Customs might involve the custom if handshaking, clothing related custom, food related custom, and even traffic (Mardiningrum & Larsati, 2021).

The third is related to social relation. It is difficult for them to socialize with other students with different languages. The findings are stated by three students below.

Anas stated” I know at first that I will have some problems learning English in Indonesia, but I take the risks and I make it as challenge. Some students have done in studying here and I think I can make it too”

Benjanuch claimed “ Before going to Indonesia I already knew that we will also learn Bahasa Indonesia here. It is not a problem for me. I knew it before”

Asnee said “ I think most students from Thailand knew it even before the apply the scholarship, So I think it is not even a problem. In fact, I also learn Bahasa Indonesia here”

Tanatporn stated “ When I hear that I was accepted to study in Thailand, I imagine that there are many new things there and I find it as new experiences”

Learning a language is also about learning how to socialize with the people. In a country where the culture and language are different, socialization barrier is one of the problems that may be faced. People’s character of the host country might also play a part as the contributing factor in this struggle (Mardiningrum & Larasati, 2021). Nam (2018) claimed that international students often get barrier on socialization with people from different countries and it affects their study. Moreover, he further stated that it result in students’ difficulties in learning the language as well as the major that they take.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of the study revealed that Thai students found it challenging to learn English in Indonesia. It is because they already know the consequences of taking English major in a non-English speaking country. They consider more on new experiences of studying abroad than potential problems that they might face. In addition, there are three barriers of studying English in Indonesia involving language of instruction, different custom, and social interaction. The current study is limited to a number of participants, limited data gathering technique, and was conducted at a university with its particular values and situation. Therefore, the results of the study should be taken with a grain of salt and should not be generalized in any SA situation.

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