

Investigating English Learning Experiences Of Students During Exchange Program

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Abstract – This study investigates the learning experiences of English Education students from Muhammadiyah University Muara Bungo who participated in the Merdeka Student Exchange Program (PMM) at Muhammadiyah University Sorong. This study aims to explore how students' experiences in learning English during the exchange program. Qualitative methods and a phenomenological approach were used, with data collected through semi-structured interviews involving two participants from the English Education program. These interviews were guided by learning theories, with thematic data analysis conducted using NVivo software. The results of the study show that students' learning experiences vary greatly, with active involvement in the use of digital learning tools such as Duolingo, multimedia resources (videos, films, PowerPoint), and collaborative group discussions. In addition, students also utilized online resources, such as articles and social media, to deepen their understanding of the language. This study concluded that the combination of digital technology and interaction with peers significantly improved English language skills. This study is expected to provide valuable insights for students who wish to participate in exchange programs in the future and contribute to the development of effective English language learning methods in educational settings.

Keywords – Learning English, Student Experiences, Student Exchange

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I. Introduction

Higher education in Indonesia continues to innovate in order to face the challenges of globalization and rapid technological developments. One of the policies initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture is the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program, which aims to help students master various fields of knowledge as preparation for entering the workforce (Aldo & Oktaviani, 2021). This policy is regulated in Permendikbud Number 3 of 2020 concerning National Higher Education Standards, with the aim of honing students' soft skills and hard skills so that they are better prepared to face the changing times and become excellent future leaders of the nation (Angraini et al., 2022).

One of the programs that is part of MBKM is the Independent Student Exchange Program (PMM), which allows students to study at universities outside their home regions for one semester, with recognition of 20 credits for learning achievements, including archipelago module activities and courses offered by the host campus (Batau & Rampeng, 2022). This program provides opportunities for students to learn about Indonesia's cultural diversity and develop their insights and skills in a cross-cultural context. Through the experiences gained from this program, it is hoped that students can enrich their perspectives on diversity, tolerance, and national values (Gea et al., 2023).

The Merdeka Student Exchange Program also provides opportunities to strengthen English language skills, which are currently very important for facing the challenges of globalization in both academic and cross-cultural contexts. Mastering English has become one of

the main competencies in education and employment, given that English is the international language used for communication between countries (Andika & Mardiana, 2023).

Muhammadiyah University of Muara Bungo is one of the universities that has sent its students to participate in the Merdeka Student Exchange Program from 2022 to 2024. This study focuses on the experiences of students in the English Education Study Program who participated in this program, to explore how they learned English in the context of this student exchange. This study aims to provide in-depth insights into the English learning process experienced by students in this exchange program.

Based on research, Abna et al. (2022) revealed that lecturers' understanding of students' backgrounds, facilities, and different learning methods at the destination campus can affect students' learning experiences. Previous studies have only focused on the learning experience in general, therefore this study aims to explore more deeply the English learning experience of students who participate in this program, with a focus on their experiences at Muhammadiyah Sorong University of Education.

II. Methodology Section

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The purpose of using a qualitative method is to understand the English learning experiences of students during the Merdeka Student Exchange Program (PMM). Phenomenology was chosen to explore students' life experiences and their perspectives on English learning. This research was conducted at Muhammadiyah University Muara Bungo due to its accessibility to relevant research participants. Interviews could be conducted in person, and data collection was carried out in a practical and efficient manner in terms of geography, time, and cost.

This study involved two participants, namely students of the English Education Study Program from Muhammadiyah University Muara Bungo, who had participated in the Merdeka Student Exchange Program at Muhammadiyah University Sorong. Both were selected because they had relevant experience in learning English during the exchange program.

Data collection techniques were carried out using semi-structured interviews as the main method of data collection, with interview questions based on indicators found in learning theory. Researchers conducted interviews in person, which allowed for a more flexible interview process and follow-up questions to obtain more detailed information from participants. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes, and voice recording was used as a data collection tool.

The data collected from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis, which focused on identifying common themes in the participants' experiences. The researchers used Creswell (2013) qualitative data analysis technique, which included transcribing interviews, organizing and preparing data for analysis, and reviewing data to understand the overall experiences of students. In addition, software such as Nvivo was used for coding and categorizing data.

III. Results

This study found that students participating in the Student Exchange Program at Muhammadiyah Sorong University of Education learned English in a variety of ways. Their learning experiences involved various learning strategies and theories. Students were actively involved in learning English by utilizing educational applications such as Duolingo to improve their language skills. In addition, they often used digital media such as videos, films, and PowerPoint to better understand the material. Learning also involved group discussions, both in person and through online platforms, to discuss more complex topics. They also utilized online resources, such as articles or journals and social networks, to broaden their knowledge and gain the latest perspectives and information.

1. Findings based on Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Students showed that the processes of English acquisition and learning went hand in hand. They often spoke spontaneously without preparation (unrehearsed English), but still had grammar awareness. Their language structure improved gradually, from basic understanding to more complex grammar usage, in line

with the indicators of the Natural Order Hypothesis. Students also frequently self-correct when speaking and writing. Students face challenges when they have to understand language input that is beyond their ability or learning material that is more difficult than their ability (challenging input), but this condition actually accelerates their development. Affective factors such as motivation, confidence, and anxiety are also proven to be very influential. Students with high motivation are more confident in communicating, while anxiety sometimes makes them hesitate to speak. This confirms the importance of the Affective Filter Hypothesis in supporting the success of foreign language learning.

2. Findings based on Behavioristic Learning Theory

In learning, students respond to stimuli in the form of lecturer presentations, questions, and instructions via Zoom. These stimuli elicit responses in the form of active engagement, such as answering questions or practicing conversations. Praise from lecturers serves as positive reinforcement that encourages students to remain active, while reprimands and direct corrections from lecturers serve as negative reinforcement that helps students correct their mistakes quickly. Student motivation increases when reinforcement is given immediately (immediacy of reinforcement), for example in the form of encouragement or brief appreciation after students complete tasks well. The process of behavior shaping is also clearly visible, such as the more they practice, the more fluent their language skills become. Although a decrease in motivation was found due to limited face-to-face interaction, students remained motivated thanks to the support of a consistent learning environment.

3. Findings based on Cognitive Learning Theory

Students actively interpret learning experiences through various cognitive strategies. Group discussions are an important means of honing critical thinking skills and testing their understanding of the material. In addition, they often practice speaking spontaneously, which helps them transition from passive to active

learners. Prior knowledge forms the basis for understanding new information they encounter, so that the learning process does not stand alone, but is connected to existing experiences. Students also use strategies such as taking detailed notes, summarizing, and focusing on key concepts to help them build a deep understanding, rather than simply memorizing. As a result, students become accustomed to thinking directly in English, which boosts their confidence.

4. Findings based on Constructivism

Learning through social interaction is key for students during exchange programs. Collaboration with peers creates a pleasant learning atmosphere and builds confidence. Difficulties, such as understanding certain accents, can be overcome with the help of lecturers and friends, in accordance with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) principle. This support not only aids in understanding the material, but also increases confidence in communication. Students also benefit from cognitive apprenticeship, which is guidance from more proficient individuals that allows them to learn language strategies gradually. In addition, interactions mediated by lecturers and the learning environment foster practical values, such as the importance of using English in everyday life. This shows that knowledge construction occurs dynamically through the social and cultural experiences they encounter.

5. Findings based on Multimedia Learning

The use of digital media has proven to be very effective in supporting material comprehension. PowerPoint, video, and audio make learning presentations clearer, more interesting, and easier to understand. Students feel that the integration of text with visuals makes it easier for them to understand the material, which is in line with the indicators of multimedia and continuity. In addition, audio narration and listening tasks help hone listening skills more deeply than just reading text. Presentations accompanied by visual illustrations are easier to remember and provide a more interactive learning experience.

6. Findings based on Connectivism

Students demonstrated learning patterns that were highly consistent with connectivism theory, in which they relied on digital networks as their primary source. Applications such as Duolingo, YouTube videos, online articles, social media, and virtual communities became means to expand their knowledge and strengthen their English language skills. They are able to connect various pieces of information from a variety of sources, proving that learning does not only depend on lecturers, but also on connectivity with the digital environment. Students also demonstrate the ability to select, sort, and link information as needed, so that learning takes place independently but remains collaborative. These findings confirm that in the digital age, success in language learning is greatly influenced by the ability to manage vast and constantly changing information.

IV. Discussion

The results of the study indicate that English language learning among students in the Student Exchange Program at Muhammadiyah Sorong University of Education takes place through a complex process and is influenced by various theories of language acquisition and learning. Findings related to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) show that students acquire language gradually and naturally, in line with the Natural Order Hypothesis, while also demonstrating metalinguistic awareness through the habit of self-correction. More challenging input actually encourages the development of their abilities, supporting Krashen's $i+1$ concept, while affective factors such as motivation and anxiety are proven to be very decisive in the success of communication. From a behavioristic perspective, students' active responses to stimuli from lecturers and the use of positive and negative reinforcement reinforce the idea that learning behavior can be shaped through consistent reinforcement, especially when feedback is given directly.

From a cognitive theory perspective, students not only receive information, but also process it through

strategies such as note-taking, summarizing, connecting new knowledge with previous experiences, and practicing spontaneous speaking. This shows that learning occurs through an active internalization process, which transforms them from passive learners into independent learners. The findings also confirm the principle of constructivism, in which social interaction through group discussions and collaboration with peers allows students to build knowledge gradually, in accordance with the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Assistance from lecturers and more proficient peers serves as a cognitive apprenticeship that helps students overcome language difficulties and increase their confidence.

The use of multimedia plays a major role in strengthening understanding of the material. The integration of text, visuals, and audio through PowerPoint, videos, and other digital materials has been proven to improve information retention and processing, in line with Mayer's Multimedia Learning Theory. These media make learning more interesting, interactive, and memorable compared to the use of text alone. Furthermore, students' learning patterns that rely on various digital sources such as Duolingo, YouTube, online articles, and virtual communities demonstrate the strong influence of connectivism in modern learning. Students are able to connect information from various sources, filter relevant material, and learn independently yet collaboratively through digital networks. Overall, this discussion shows that the success of students' English language learning in exchange programs does not depend on a single theory, but is the result of a combination of behaviorist, cognitive, constructivist, SLA, multimedia learning, and connectivism approaches that complement each other in creating a dynamic and effective learning experience.

V. Conclusion

This study concludes that students' experiences in learning English while participating in student exchange programs are diverse and dynamic. Students

actively utilize various learning applications, digital media, and online resources to help improve their English skills. The learning process is not only carried out independently, but also through social interaction with classmates and lecturers, thereby broadening their horizons, increasing their confidence, and accelerating their adaptation to a new learning environment. Despite facing challenges such as language barriers and differences in communication styles, students are still able to improve their English skills thanks to the support of technology and a collaborative learning environment. These results show that student exchange programs can be a platform for developing students' English skills in a practical, relevant, and academically appropriate manner.

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