

**STUDENTS' PERCEPTION  
OF ENGLISH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND STRATEGIES**

Fetty Poerwita Sary

[f.poerwitasary@gmail.com](mailto:f.poerwitasary@gmail.com)

Telkom University, Bandung, Indonesia

**Abstract:** English is considered as important in this era, especially towards the implementation of the ASEAN free market known as the ASEAN Economic Community by the end of 2015, which means that competition in the job market will increase. Many universities open their international class to facilitate the need of prospective students (senior high school graduates). In fact, there are still problems facing by the students in learning English as a tool to understand other courses. Therefore, the research is aimed to know students' perception of the difficulties they encounter in learning English as a foreign language, also the reasons underlying these difficulties, and strategies they use in accomplishing their linguistic tasks. This study used two questionnaires that are distributed to 45 new students of International ICT Business class, Telkom University Bandung Indonesia. The results showed that the 98% of respondents said that they have problem in English especially grammar. It was due to their lack of knowledge of the English linguistic rules, and they made use of various strategies; social and affective strategies mainly.

**Key words:** English learning, difficulties, strategies

**Introduction**

ASEAN free market does really open our eyes to be realistic in facing what happened in the job market. Masyarakat Ekonomi ASEAN (MEA) or ASEAN Economic Community will be implemented by the end 2015. It means that whether we are ready or not, soon or later the time will come. It does not only open flow of goods or services, but also the labor market. MEA requires the elimination of rules that have plagued the recruitment of foreign labor. So in essence, MEA will give more opportunities of foreign workers to fill various positions and professions in Indonesia and also allow Indonesian workers to work abroad as well. ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/indonesia/berita\\_indonesia](http://www.bbc.co.uk/indonesia/berita_indonesia), 2014)

Actually, this situation is realized by many people. The presence of international schools, from kindergarten to university level, is mushrooming in Indonesia (Sary, 2013) to anticipate it. Many people aware they need to get exposed to English language to make

them get used to it. To be the students in international class, English is very important to be prepared before they start to study in international class. It is because the class will be conducted in English. Otherwise, it will be very difficult for the students to understand other courses. From the pilot study using all population of new students of international ICT Business class 2014-2015, it can be summed up as follows:

**Table 1: Students' Perception about English exposure**

No	Questions	Yes	No
1	Do you have problems with English?	98%	2%
2	Do you have opportunity to speak English outside the class?	13%	87%
3	Do you have had enough exercises in primary and secondary school in the various language skills?	47%	53%
4	Do you think that those skills should be sharpened in higher education?	100%	0%
5	When you do not like the topic of what you read, do you have problems in understanding what you read?	68%	32%

Before the students were accepted to be the international students, they should take TOEFL test and enclosed the certificate during the registration. Here is the result of the students' score.

**Table 2: Students' TOEFL Score**

TOEFL Score	Number of students	Percentage
Above 500	3	7%
450-499	21	47%
400-449	15	33%
350-399	6	13%

In Telkom University, the international students should get the TOEFL Score at least 500 to graduate. It means that still many students need to improve their English. Why the standard is so high? It is because they are going to need that for mastering other subjects. If they have problem in English, they will find problems in understanding the subject they are learning. Therefore, this study deals with the difficulties of the students when they learn English as a foreign language, and the reasons for these difficulties as perceived by the student themselves. This study tries to determine the difficulties faced by

the students when learning English whether they were due to the students' lack of knowledge of language rules, lack of motivation for foreign language, or lack of training (Ghrib, 2004) which are affected by the language learning itself. The research is also dealing with the students' use of strategies when they do their assignment especially when it is related to linguistic capability.

When it concerns about the learners strategies, Muslim in Sary (2009) stated that learning strategy that can develop students' involvement in the teaching and learning process is pra learning activity, information delivery, students' role, evaluation, and feedback. Meanwhile, learning strategies, according to Scarcella and Oxford (1992) in Oxford (2003), are "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques --such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning"

There are four dimensions of learning style that are considered the most strongly associated with L2 or FL learning, namely: sensory preference, personality type, desired degree of generality, and biological difference.

### **Sensory Preference**

Sensory preference can be defined as perceptual learning channel that the students find the most comfortable. It can be divided into four areas:

a. Visual.

For this area, usually the students like to read and get the information from visual stimulation. Without any visual backup, the lecturers' explanation can be quite confusing for the students.

b. Auditory

For auditory learners, it will be easily for them to understand the lecturers' conversation and oral direction. They are interested in classroom interaction in role-plays or similar activity, but they will face problem in written work.

c. Kinesthetic (movement-oriented)

d. Tactile (touch-oriented).

Kinesthetic and tactile students are almost the same. What they like are lots of movement and enjoy working with tangible objects, collages, and flashcards. Sitting at a desk for very long will make them feel bored. They prefer to have frequent breaks and move around the room.

## Personality Types

Personality type, often called psychological type, is a construct based on the work of psychologist Carl Jung. Ehrman and Oxford (1989, 1990) in Oxford (2003) found a number of significant relationships between personality type and language proficiency. There are four types of personality, namely:

a. extraverted vs. introverted

By definition, extraverts gain their greatest energy from the external world. They want interaction with people and have many friendships, some deep and some not. In contrast, introverts derive their energy from the internal world, seeking solitude and tending to have just a few friendships, which are often very deep. Extraverts and introverts can learn to work together with the help of the lecturer.

b. intuitive-random vs. sensing-sequential;

Intuitive-random students tend to think in abstract, futuristic, large-scale, and non-sequential ways. They often like to have sudden insights, create theories and new possibilities, and prefer to guide their own learning. In contrast, sensing-sequential learners need guidance and specific instruction from the lecturers, and look for consistency. They like facts rather than theories.

c. thinking vs. feeling

Thinking learners are oriented toward the stark truth, even though it hurts some people's feelings. They want to be viewed as competent and do not tend to offer praise easily—even though they might secretly desire to be praised themselves. In comparison, feeling learners value other people in very personal ways. They show empathy and compassion through words, not just behaviors, and say whatever is needed to smooth over difficult situations.

d. closure-oriented/judging vs. open/perceiving.

Closure-oriented students want to reach judgments or completion quickly and want clarity as soon as possible. These students are serious, hardworking learners who like to be given written information and enjoy specific tasks with deadlines. In contrast, open learners learn language less seriously, treating it like a game to be enjoyed rather than a set of tasks to be completed. Open learners dislike deadlines; they want to have a good time and seem to soak up the information by osmosis rather than hard effort. Open learners sometimes do better than closure-oriented learners in developing fluency (Ehrman & Oxford, 1989 in Oxford, 2003), but they are at a disadvantage in a traditional classroom setting. Closure-oriented and open learners provide a good

balance foreach other in the classroom. The former are the task-driven learners, and the latter knowhow to have fun.

### Desired Degree of Generality

It emphasizes on the contrasts of the learner who focuses on the main idea or big picture with the learner who concentrates on details. Global or holistic students like socially interactive, communicative events in which they can emphasize the main idea and avoid analysis of grammatical detail. They are comfortable even when not having all the information. They feel free to guess from the context. Analytic students tend to concentrate on grammatical details and often avoid more free-flowing communicative activities. Because of their concern for precision, analytic learners typically do not take the risks necessary for guessing from the context unless they are fairly sure of the accuracy of their guesses. The global student and the analytic student have much to learn from each other. A balance between generality and specificity is very useful for learning.

### Biological Differences

Differences in learning style can also be related to biological factors, such as biorhythm, sustenance, and location. Biorhythm refers to the times of day when students feel good and perform their best. For example some students will perform their best in the morning, meanwhile the others will feel afternoon or even evening is the best time to learn. Sustenance refers to the need for food or drink while learning. Quite a number of learners do not feel comfortable learning without snacking, but others are distracted from study by food and drink. Location involves the nature of the environment: temperature, lighting, sound, and even the firmness of the chairs. Students differ widely with regard to these environmental factors.

In Oxford study (1990), she synthesized the previous study and resulted in language learning strategy system. There are six categories include memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. These categories are divided into two main types, namely: direct and indirect.

**Tabel 3: Language Learning Strategy (Oxford, 1990)**

Type	Main Strategy	Additional Strategy
Direct	1. Memory	A. Creating a mental engagement
		B. Applying the image and sound
		C. Reviewing well

		D. Using the action
		E. Storing and recalling memory.
		A. Practicing
		B. Receiving and sending messages
		C. Analyzing and providing reasons
		D. Creating a structure for input and output
		E. Understanding and producing a new language with many different ways
		A. Guessing intelligently
		B. Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing
Indirect	1. Metacognitive	A. Focusing on your learning
		B. Organizing and planning your learning
		C. Evaluating the results of your study
		D. Controlling your own way of thinking.
	2. Affective	A. Reducing your anxiety
		B. Wandering your own
		C. Setting your emotion, motivation, and attitude
	3. Social	A. Asking questions
		B. Working with others
		C. Feeling empathy with others
		D. Learning through interaction with others

These two strategies (direct and indirect) can be implemented into four skills of language learning—speaking, writing, listening, and reading.

O'Malley et al in Ghrib (2004) categorizes learning strategies into:

- a. Metacognitive strategies, which may entail planning the organization of written/ spoken discourse, previewing, preparation, monitoring, self-evaluation, etc.
- b. Cognitive strategies, which may involve repetition, resourcing, ordering, grouping or classification of words and concepts, substitution, inferencing, elaboration, deduction/ induction, transfer, translation, etc.
- c. Social mediation/ social and affective strategies, which may imply eliciting from a teacher/ peer additional explanation, cooperation, working with peers, self-talk, etc.

## Research Design and Methodology

### Participants

In this research, there were 45 students; 23 female and 22 male students, who ranged in age from 16-20 years old, were almost all speakers are Indonesian. The participants voluntarily fill in the questionnaires.

## Research Instruments

The research is based on two student questionnaires. The first questionnaire was modified from Grib's study (2004). It is intended to explore more about the students' socio economic and cultural background, their linguistic habits and preferences, their motivation for and attitudes towards the learning of English and other foreign languages. The students also need to rate from 1 to 5 based on their perceptions toward their English ability which 1 represented 'bad'; 2 'below average'; 3 'average'; 4 'fairly good'; and 5 'good'. The students were asked about if they pose difficulties in learning English, and about the reasons underlying them. They were also asked about the strategies they used to solve some of their lexical and/ semantic problem.

The second questionnaire was about testing, and about their attitude towards the English learning, which they had to evaluate as well. The students should rate their ability in listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. Each rating was on a 4-point scale where 1 represented 'best', and 4 'least good'. The students also have to indicate the order of difficulty of the various skills they had to learn on a 4-point scale where 1 represented the 'easiest' and 4 the "hardest" skill. Besides that, the students were asked about the difficulties they faced when learning the skills in English language and the reason; they also need to inform about the learning strategies they used to solve their linguistic problem; namely, lexical and semantic.

## Data Collection and Procedure

The data gathered from students' responses were collected then grouped, classified, and analyzed in relation to the points under investigation. Some percentages and frequency counts were provided whenever needed, and whenever possible; sometimes the respondents gave more than one answer, so the total count of the answer/ scores was not the total number of students but all answers should be considered when calculating percentages.

The data presented and discussed in this study are in accordance with the following points:

- a. Characteristics of Respondents
- b. The student's difficulties in English and the reason underlying them.
- c. The students' strategies.

## Results and Data Analysis

### Characteristics of Respondents

The respondents in this study can be categorized based on their age, sex, family background (parents' occupation and level of instruction), and their habit in using English. The respondents' range of age is between 16-20 years old or it can be categorized as teenagers. Most of them are 18 years old (82%). The sex of respondents is balanced between male (49%) and female (51%). Regarding to parents' occupation, most of the respondents' parents are working (96%) and the parents' profession shows that the respondents are included in 'the have' family which means that they can afford their children to study in the international class. Parents' educational background is also shows how parents want their children to be successful through education because parents usually want their children can achieve more (78% of them graduated from bachelor, master, or doctoral degree) than them and they realize that competition is getting harder for their children so that they put their children to study in the international class.

### Learner's difficulties in English and the Reason underlying them

44 respondents out of 45 of the total respondents stated that they had problems in English. When they were asked to give an order of difficulty for the various skills, respondents mentioned that listening and writing are the hardest skills, and speaking and reading among the easiest. This matches their ability order in the various skills and the researcher's perception of the learners' difficulties.

### Difficulties with Writing Skills

75% of the respondents use Indonesian first before they start writing in English. The way they think is like when they speak Indonesian after that it is translated into English. According to survey conducted by [www.englishclub.com](http://www.englishclub.com), **writing** is the most difficult one among the four skills (Arable, 2005). The survey found that listening and reading are the skills for learners to 'collect' information. Meanwhile, speaking and writing are the skills to 'produce' the information that we have got from listening and reading. Thus, speaking and writing are more difficult than listening and reading.

Moreover, the respondents stated that the main difficulties in writing English because of lack of grammar knowledge, vocabularies, and organization of ideas and text. Topic, spelling, overall structure, argumentation, punctuation, capitalization, and reference were not given as much importance.

**Table 4: Respondents' main difficulties in Writing**

Items	Score	%	Rank
Grammar	39	38%	1
Vocabulary and meaning	21	20%	2
Logical Reasoning (organization of ideas and text)	10	10%	3
Content/topic/idea	9	9%	4
Spelling	7	7%	5
Overall structure	6	6%	6
Argumentation	4	4%	7
Punctuation	4	4%	8
Capitalization	2	2%	9
Reference	2	2%	10
Exemplification	0	0%	11
Others	0	0%	12
Total	104	100%	

### Difficulties with the Listening Skill

The respondents stated that vocabulary, accent/ pronunciation, grammar as their major problems encountered with the listening skills (as in table 5). As mentioned by the previous survey that listening skill is needed to collect information, so that how can the students get the information as much as possible when the lecturer give explanation if they still have problem with this skill (how can they understand the material).

**Table 5: Respondents' main difficulties in Listening**

Items	Score	%	Rank
Vocabulary	19	22%	1
Accent/Pronunciation	18	20%	2
Grammar	14	16%	3
Meaning	8	9%	4
Topic	8	9%	5
Other (technical problems, such as bad audio)	4	5%	6
Reference	2	2%	7
Example	0	0%	0
Total	88	100%	

Meanwhile, according to the respondents they like to listen to English program and records and watch the English program as well which means that the students actually do

have this skill but for some reasons such as lack of material, equipment, training in how to use the equipment, real-life situations where language learners need to understand spoken English, finally it might not help the students to improve their listening skill.

Besides that, almost all of lecturers in the international class are actually from Indonesia. The lecturers produce the same sounds in different ways such as different dialects and accents, stresses, rhythms, intonations, and mispronunciations. It can happen because they are all from different region in Indonesia and usually in each region has its own accent or dialect. So that, it is difficult for the students to listen and understand what the lecturers' explanation.

### Difficulties with Reading Skills

Table 6 shows that lack of vocabulary and meaning was again the major problem for the respondents (36%). Other items such as argumentation, exemplification, idiom, lazy to read, scientific words, and reference were not given as much importance.

The results also revealed that some of the respondents are lack of motivation to read in English which will give an impact on the reading process (Ghrib, 2004). For instance, as a matter of fact that 33% of respondents mentioned that they did not know how to get the logical reasoning of what they read so that it is hard to understand the content/ topic/ idea. It must be also kept in mind that once the students have the difficulties with the themes and topic, it will influence their ability in reading textbook. They will consider that the book is not interesting or challenging which in turn they fail to understand the subjects/ courses.

**Table 6: Respondents' main difficulties in Reading**

Items	Score	%	Rank
Meaning	18	19%	1
Vocabulary	18	19%	2
Logical Reasoning (organization of ideas and text)	17	18%	3
Content/topic/ideas	14	15%	4
Grammar	11	12%	5
argumentation	5	5%	6
Exemplification	4	4%	7
Others (idiom, lazy to read, scientific words)	3	3%	8
Reference	3	3%	9
Total	93	100%	

### Difficulties with Speaking Skills

When asked about their difficulties in speaking English, the students said that most of their problems stemmed from their lack of grammar (see table 7); they also mentioned that expressing their thought directly in English as their second obstacle, and considered being shy as a third problem.

**Table 7: Respondents' main difficulties in Speaking**

Items	Score	%	Rank
Grammar	28	26%	1
Expressing your thought directly in English	25	23%	2
Being shy	16	15%	3
Vocabulary	16	15%	4
Pronunciation	14	13%	5
Content/topic	7	6%	6
Meaning	2	2%	7
Example	0	0	8
Other (technical problems, such as bad audio)	0	0	9
Total	108	100%	

The respondents also mentioned that they do not have opportunity to speak English outside the class (87%). They will interact with their friend with Bahasa Indonesia instead of English even though that they are in the class. The lecturers should remind them over and over again to switch the language into English.

### Reasons for Learners' Difficulties

The students' difficulties with the various skills/ tasks as revealed by the two questionnaires, indicates that:

- The respondents considered that their problems were linguistics for most part. They admitted that they had difficulties with grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, themes, topics, meaning.
- The students' difficulties were also cognitive/ mental that they were not able to think in English directly and they relied on Indonesian. Moreover the students reported that they had difficulties with logical reasoning, argumentation.
- The students mentioned that the primary and secondary school had not prepared them well with the exercises in order to sharpen their language skills. Therefore, they still need that the skills should be taught or given in higher school.

- d. Students' difficulties were also psychological and it results from lack of motivation to use English (to read, to speak, to write, and to listen) and shyness.
- e. The students' difficulties were sometimes technical and organizational such as spelling, capitalization, punctuation and with overall structure and paragraphing like organization of ideas and text.

What is interesting to note is that most of the factors underlying students' problem were internal factors (problems that come from the students themselves) rather than external ones resulting from teaching and lack of exposure to the English language. Even though, the problems that the students face now are the result of the process of teaching and learning they got in primary and secondary school.

### **Learners' Strategies**

When the respondents answered the Questionnaire I, the respondents were asked about their strategies they used to solve lexical and/ semantic problems, provided the following examples, which were categorized as follows:

- a. Social and Affective strategies: 'I ask someone for help'
- b. Resourcing: 'I look up words in the textbook or in a dictionary'
- c. Paraphrasing: 'I use synonym, express idea differently by changing the structure'
- d. Simplification: 'I simplify my sentence'
- e. Avoidance Strategy: 'I give up'; 'I leave a blank'
- f. Translation: 'I use an equivalent term in Indonesian language'

The result of respondents' strategies in learning English will be presented in table 8 below:

**Table 8: Respondents' Strategies in Learning English**

No	Strategy	%	Rank
1	Social and Affective Strategies	24.34%	1
2	Resourcing	21.57%	2
3	Paraphrasing	20.22%	3
4	Simplification	14.83%	4
5	Translation	10.41%	5
6	Avoidance Strategy	8.63%	6

All the mentioned strategies were shared by the respondents since the all almost had background in common; what varied was the learners' rank ordering and the frequency of use of each strategy. The respondents tend to ask their friends first if they do not know the answer or understand. After that, if their friend cannot answer their questions or if they think that their friends' answer is not satisfying than they will look up dictionary. In writing, usually the respondents will try to rewrite their sentence by changing their sentence structure but still have the same idea or they use synonym. If they cannot write long sentence, they tend to write the sentence as simple as possible. If they do not know the vocabulary, they will borrow Indonesian language vocabulary or use equivalent term in Indonesian. At the end, if they totally do not know or understand how to express their idea, they will keep their answer blank.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It can be concluded from this study that most respondents considered that grammar and vocabulary are the main problem they face when they want to use skill in English language. It influenced their writing skill because when they want to express their idea, they feel not confident since they are lack of grammar knowledge even though they have learned about it in primary and secondary school. It is recommended that for these students, additional English course or treatment is needed to support them to learn English.

The respondents also mentioned that writing and listening were the most difficult skill for them, so that exercises that emphasize to these skills should be considered important. Besides that, the institution also needs to give facilities such as English Self Learning Center where students can learn and improve their own English capability by themselves. Institution also has to support the material in this center such as movies, song, magazines, novel, or short stories which in turn can also improve their vocabulary. Lecturers also can give the student extra text to be read in the class or at home as a homework. Ask the students to summarize, paraphrase, and present it in front of the class.

To sum up, lecturers also could make language task more as 'social activities' and less as language exercise since more respondents tend to use this strategy. Make the students feel happy when they learn and without realizing that actually they are learning.

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