

**EFL LEARNERS' IDENTITY:
A STUDY ON A PESANTREN-BASED
SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN WONOSOBO**

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Abstract

This research is a study on EFL learner's identity in a pesantren-based senior high school in the Regency of Wonosobo. The studied issue covers three matters, i.e. the way learners' identity relate their world and experiences to English language learning, the involvement of learners' identity in stimulating learners' enthusiasm towards English language acquisition, and the way learners' cultural conceptualization in their first language acquisition contribute to English language learning. This research is important to support the consideration in curriculum and material development in Teaching English to students of Islamic schools.

Keywords: identity, learners, English

A. Introduction

Learners' identity is significant in English language learning in which they are expected to adapt with the new language. The community of teachers and learners have unique characteristics with the world of English native speaker. It is important for Indonesian students because most of them have typical cultures that cover their lives and point of view. Therefore, reasearch and other activities related to learners identity become very important for the acquisition of English in Indonesia. It is why, the researcher conducted the study on learners' identity in a pesantren-based senior high school in Wonosobo by exploring some matters including the way learners' identity relate the world and experiences they inhabit to English language learning. Also, it will find out the involvement of learners' identity in stimulating learners' enthusiasm towards the target language that results the achievement of learning outcomes. It will also investigate whether

learners have the same cultural conceptualization when they learn the first language in English language learning context.

B. Literature Review

Every educational process involves two important parts, i.e. learner and the community where the learning occurs. In addition, all educational activities brings about a learning concept, namely what is taught, who is teaching, how to teach, and how to implement. Learners are expected to bring their prior knowledge in learning the target language in order to receive new learning tasks (Little, 1994). With the intention of achieving that ability, a learner is required to have a strong motivation. This motivation is a prerequisite to sustain the process required by those involve in English language learning, especially teacher and learners themselves.

One of the ways that can be done by English teachers is encouraging the learners in order to have instrumental motivation in which they base their interest on their purposes as students who should pass the exam (Cook, 1996). They can be motivated by inducing that learning the target language is a requirement for them in order to be able to pass English examination in their schools. In this way, the process of the target language acquisition process will return to them in order to get a better future (Dornyei, 2001).

Learners with unique characteristics have an engagement with the cultural norm in which most of the community members develop a unique way to appreciate others and to express their ideas. In this case, teachers and learners are parts of a learning community within a unique cultural background in which they are related to particular language norms (Barnett, 2006). Such circumstance supports the unique characteristic that is different from English native speakers' world in EFL classroom.

In the context of Islamic school, learners prefer to learn Arabic seriously as the language that support their perspectives. In this case, they find that Arabic is used everytime they are engage in Islamic studies class. This condition strengthen their identity as muslim students in where they develop characteristics in their English classroom as the member of the unique group (Watson-Gegeo, 2005).

Related to how the language gives information about the identity of the speakers, learners exhibit unique forms of communication based on socio-cultural dimension that allow them to communicate with peers in a particular community (Watson-Gegeo, 2005). This situation is caused by their experiences as English learners who live in a community that does not use English as the first or second language. Consequently, their point of view in language socialisation is influenced by the existing circumstance.

C. Significance of the study

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

D. Research Methodology

Data are collected from EFL class in a *pesantren*-based senior high school in the Regency of Wonosobo. The range of students' age is 19-25 with various levels of proficiency from elementary to intermediate. The observation method is one of the tools used for data collection process due to the reason that the research leads to achieve qualitative data that does not involve table and statistical measurement. The second method chosen for this research is qualitative interview to maintain the good quality of data and to obtain much more information. Another reason is that because the inquiry is about students' feeling the data collection process involves the face-to-face conversation between the researcher and the researched. The second method chosen for this research is qualitative interview to maintain the good quality of data and to obtain much more information. The a priori approach, as the part of thematic data analysis is involved in getting the outcome of the analysis. By using this approach, the researcher determines the categories in order to group the data without considering what reveals from the data (Freeman, 1998). Basically, there are four elements of data analysis, i.e. naming, grouping, finding relationship, and displaying (Anonym 2008).

E. Result

1. The way learners' identity relate the world and experiences they inhabit to English language learning

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

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

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

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

It is indicated that learners have a cultural identity as *pesantren* students when they arrive at school under their school uniform. By mentioning "*there will be entitlement as a student of pesantren when I go to school,....*" by respondent 1 and "*we know that we are students of pesantren*" by respondent 3, it is acknowledged that the identity as a *santri* (student of *pesantren*) can not be avoided along with the consequences. It points out that the status of *santri* is attached to them as acknowledge by the community. On the other hand, the cultural identity as *santri* does not influence the need to join the class other than religion class under the curriculum of the Ministry of Education and Culture, not the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This is shown by the statement "*but we also have to distinguish which one is the pesantren and which one is the school*" and another statement "*but...if we only get*

knowledge of religion at school, we also need to explore the knowledge other than Islamic studies" (respondent 1).

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

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

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

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

Related to the content of the material and the preliminary information given by English teachers about the content material to be provided, it can be identified that the student has obtained preliminary information about the materials to be obtained by students. Thus they do not experience surprising things when the process of learning takes place, as stated by respondent 3 below.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The respondent gave a statement that she the knowledge learned at the boarding school can not be separated from those studied in school. This shows the awareness of the obligation to integrate these two types of learning to get more results.

2. The involvement of learners' identity in stimulating learners' enthusiasm towards the target language that results the achievement of learning outcomes

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

English user community. This is confirmed by the statement of the respondent 4 below:

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

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

Based on observations made in the classroom, there are indications that the students are able to adapt naturally to the material that has different shades with which they have learned as *santri*. This suggests that the enthusiasm in the process of English language acquisition in students is not affected by the identity of the target language culture which is different from the language of their culture.

This is also reflected in a statement made by the respondent 7 about Valentine's Day that is only found in Christian culture and the Western world.

... we adjust, sir, if there is such a reading possible from the formal described everyone as it is, but it's back again to us whether it is right or wrong, so we can control ourselves, for example, if something is wrong based on our opinion but other people think it's right, then it only becomes a school reading (respondent 7)

From this respondent, it can be interpreted that the students with the identity of *santri* can filter sensitive matters of knowledge and norms according to which they get in the pesantren. This indicates that the student has been able to build an understanding of how to adapt to and respect other communities as opposed to their uniqueness. Instead of rejecting the material, something that is done by the students with the

unique characteristics of this community is trying to adjust to the world of reality that is in front of them. With this tolerance, they are trying to build a flexible understanding in order to facilitate English language acquisition process along with the adaptation of the accompanying culture.

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

I think not, because we do not know in the future if we're going to be in a certain place for preaching. So if later on we preach abroad we are not confused because it was taught in schools,... so it helped with English lessons from school. (6 respondents)

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

3. learners' cultural conceptualization in their first language acquisition that contribute to English language learning

The use of the concept of indigenous culture as students by teachers in teaching English in the classroom provide motivation for students to involve themselves actively in learning activities. Appropriate adjustments to the use of the concept of culture makes it easy for teachers to engage with students. It can be identified from the following statement of the respondent 2.

If it does to be honest: yes. Suppose there are teachers who has a background from outside the pesantren and never knew the pesantren's delivery is slightly different from pesantren's teacher... it affects me in learning, I might be more comfortable with teachers who have a

background of pesantren... because they have a better understanding of our conditions. (respondent 2)

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

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

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

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

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

The expression of respondent 3 given above illustrates the need for students to greater knowledge than that obtained from her *pesantren*. The student wants the wider knowledge she get from the public school, although still remains in the culture of the *pesantren* environment. Thus, the acquisition of material should not be limited by cultural conceptualization of *pesantren* without involving changes that occur outside of the cultural environment

of the students mentioned above. It is also reinforced by respondents 9 and 10 who does not agree when all the material given in English lessons entirely contains about *pesantren*.

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

*...I think, it tends to give us only one subject matter. If it has public bas, we'll get two subjects, *pesantren* and public school,.... (respondent 10)*

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

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

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

The respondent shows that students of a *pesantren*-based senior high school that are also *santri* of *pesantren* have acquired a consciousness to follow the development outside their cultural environment. As mentioned by respondent 3 "...so later we do not know about the outside world as well." it is identified that desire to be part of the global environment becomes a liability. On the other hand, students also need to get variation in learning and acquisition of the English language both in boarding school and at school, as expressed by the respondents 4 Di lain pihak, siswa juga membutuhkan variasi dalam melakukan pembelajaran dan penguasaan bahasa Inggris baik di pondok *pesantren* maupun di sekolah, sebagaimana disampaikan oleh responden 4 "When in

school we were also taught about pesantren again, eventually we got tired." (respondent 4).

F. Closing

1. Conclusion

From the research done about the identity of English language learners with the background of this boarding school students, it can be concluded that:

- a. learners' identity in pesantren-based senior high school in Wonosobo Regency is able to relate the world and experiences they inhabit to English language learning. In this case, the learners have been able to make adjustments to the culture of which was originally a *santri* of *pesantren* into public school students that are faced with the challenge of globalization.
- b. There is an involvement of learners' identity in stimulating learners' enthusiasm towards the target language that results the achievement of EFL learning outcomes
- c. The inclusion of cultural conceptualization of the learner's mother language does not affect the process of teaching and learning activities in English lessons. The respondents prefer to acquire knowledge about different cultural concepts of their experiences in *pesantren*.

2. Suggestion

Based on these results, the researchers suggested that the English teachers in formal schools in the *pesantren* environment that they continue to give an explicit description in relation to cross-cultural understanding. Advice is also given to the authors of teaching materials of textbooks in English that will be used by the formal schools in the *pesantren* environment that it is better to display a description of the cultural identity of the target language in order to disseminate the traditions and customs that have been maintained by a community of language target. To policy makers, the researcher submits a suggestion to continue to provide opportunities that conveys the cultural identity of the target language in the English lessons so that the students do not experience culture shock when they meet certain conditions in the future.

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