

## LEARNING ENGLISH FOR INDONESIAN ADULT LEARNERS: WHAT THEY THINK AND WHAT THEY EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract:** Learning English has always been a challenge for many learners in Indonesia, especially adult learners. Thus, this research aimed at describing the adult learners' perception on learning English and their experience when learning it during secondary schools. The participants of this research were 15 school staff, aged 20 to 50 years old. Under qualitative research, the close-ended questionnaire, field-note, and documentation were used as the research instruments to collect the data from the participants. The findings indicated that despite the participants' interest in learning English, they faced difficulties in performing it daily. This research exposed the main cause of the participants' difficulties in composing correct sentences orally and in writing was due to unvaried English teaching and learning activities in their secondary schools, which made learners could not perform the language on an ongoing basis. Secondary teachers are encouraged to implement more varied and interesting methods during English lessons.

**Keywords:** *adult learners, perception, experience, difficulties*

Developments at the present time require humans to develop internationally as well. One way of developing is, of course, mastering English as the international language. To support the globalization and internationalization, many efforts have been made by teachers, government, or interested officials to improve the English language skills of Indonesian learners. And not only students, employees with certain work areas are also demanded to be able to communicate actively in English. One example is the place where we were conducting this research. As an educational institution that is growing and aspires to increase involvement in the international arena, the leaders aspire to develop their human resource skills through several short English courses in collaboration with a university language institution. For approximately 1 month with 28 meetings and a duration of 2 hours, the employees received English training that focused on speaking skills and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The aim of the course is to establish the English skills of the employees in accordance with the ideals of the educational institution. The existence of this activity sparked our curiosity about the perception of these employees who had to learn English again after graduating from high school for a long time.

Before conducting this study, we observed and evaluated briefly the overall skills of the research participants in performing English inside their classroom. We noticed that most participants had difficulties in using accurate English grammar. It could be seen from several activities which included speaking or writing. The participants generally had trouble in composing simple sentences containing subject and predicate. They did not have adequate knowledge on how to deliver their ideas and arranged the ideas into good structured utterances written and orally. In a simple example, they could not introduce their names, mentioning their ages, or telling their occupations using good grammatical sentences. The mistakes were often on the absence of predicates and incorrectness of past, present, or future tenses. The difficulties faced by those adult learners and the possible causes were the main reason of this research

In the Indonesian teaching and learning context, students learn and use English in formal educational settings, such as schools or English courses. They rarely use English in the daily activities. Despite the fact that most learners were introduced to English language from an early age, the lack of habituation and stimulation from environments contributes to the futility of English teaching and learning in educational institutions. In 2021, an international education company, EF (English First), issued a list of the world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills. It was reported that Indonesia ranks 80<sup>th</sup> out of 112 countries in English First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) and fell under the Low

Proficiency Band category (EF, 2021). It concluded that English language learning in Indonesia could not be defined successful.

The differences between the native language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, and English are very problematic. Some distinguishable elements between the two languages are grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In *Bahasa Indonesia*, utterances are not composed according to past, present, or future time. Moreover, utterances in *Bahasa Indonesia* are not pronounced differently from how they are written. It is the opposite of English. Many English words are spelled the same, but pronounced differently, or vice versa. Due to the differences, students would find that learning English is challenging. They are faced with various difficulties in mastering the language skills and sub-skills. Suryanto and Sari (2021) found that common problems faced by university students in learning English were usually related to the issues of vocabulary shortage, grammar difficulties, pronunciation problems, low speaking and listening skills.

The low proficiency of Indonesian learners and failures in performing the language during classes prove that English teaching and learning in many schools are often considered deficient. Many factors can actually influence the success of a language learning inside the classroom, such as learners' aptitude, motivation, age, and enforcement. Another factor that is not less important is the teachers' quality, especially in conducting the teaching and learning. Since teachers and students interact most often in the class, it is inevitable that teachers play a big role in learners' success. Teachers are expected to provide students with the best materials, media, and method. However, many teachers are still unaware that their lack of skills makes students cannot receive comprehensible inputs from their teachers. Teachers' limitation in providing appropriate teaching aids and innovative methods which results in students' low motivation and interest will make it more difficult for students to be able to learn English successfully (Sintadewi, Artini, Febryan, 2020).

The discussions of students' perception about difficulties and factors that may influence their language learning have actually been exposed in many studies. In term of students' difficulties, Rohmatillah (2014) showed that even students of English Education Department faced various problems or difficulties in vocabulary learning. Similarly, Sundari (2018) found that beginner English learners in Indonesia usually faced several obstacles in learning English, such as the difficulties in determining the word class of the same vocabulary and pronouncing due to different elements between English and Indonesian language as well as different distribution of phonetic characteristics between English and Indonesia. Next, Rintaningrum (2018) who conducted research on university students explored that foreign language learners found it difficult to listen to English. On the other hand, high school students thought that spoken English was much more difficult than written English (Arta, 2019).

As for factors influencing the success of English learning inside classrooms, students have various perceptions. Other than varied intrinsic factors which students definitely attribute to; it is the teacher factor that frequently affects the students' learning outcomes. Renandya, Hamied, and Nurkamto (2018) mentioned in their research that many teachers might not have reached a level of proficiency considered sufficient for effective teaching. Low proficiency teachers in Indonesia were also revealed in a study by Lie et al. (2019) stating that senior English teachers show lower proficiency scores. Accordingly, low proficiency of teachers will result in inadequate opting to varied materials, media, and method. Another issue regarding the role of teachers is regular uses of *Bahasa Indonesia* as the instructional language in the classrooms. In fact, many students would prefer their teachers to speak English, avoid using *Bahasa Indonesia* as much as possible, and require the students to speak English during their English classes (Handayani, 2015; Haryanto, Sulistiyo, Khairani, & Wulan, 2016; Resmini, 2019).

The difficulties faced by Indonesian learners in performing simple actions as we exemplified in the case of employees who are unable to do self-introductions are quite disheartening, considering that the participants have studied English for at least 6 years in secondary school. There must be causes for those difficulties. Previous studies show that learners' low motivation and/or teachers' low proficiency might lead to insufficient methods of teaching (Renandya et al., 2018; Sintadewi et al., 2020). Thus, this present study aims at understanding the difficulties faced by English learners and possible causes of their difficulties. This research also aims at exploring the adult learners' perception of learning English during their secondary school to find the major cause of learners' low proficiency. The study is expected to expose (1) the learners' belief of learning English, (2) the learners' belief of speaking English, (3) the learners' activities in English classes during their secondary schools, (4) the learners' perception of the best way in learning English, and (5) the skills that the students need to practice the most.

## METHOD

This research uses qualitative approach with exploratory descriptive method in defining the data, selecting the instruments, gathering the data, and analyzing the data. In this research, we exposed the research participants in perceiving the process of English learning during their secondary school without predicting the results.

The research was conducted in one private senior high school at Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia. The research participants were fifteen employees of the school with various educational backgrounds and positions, with age ranging between 20 to 50 years old. The selection was purposefully made to find out what the adult learners feel and think of English during their secondary schools. The description of the participants' details is presented in the following Table 1.

**Table 1. Participants' Background**

No.	Name	Position	Age	Educational Background
1	Ms. HS	Secretary of School Leader	42	Bachelor of Social Sciences
2	Ms. DW	Head of Finance	49	<i>unidentified</i>
3	Mr. WFS	Head of Household Department	31	Bachelor of Education
4	Mr. ZA	Head of General Administration	33	Bachelor of Agriculture
5	Ms. EMR	Head of Curriculum and Students	34	Bachelor of Economics
6	Mr. MY	Head of Public Service	43	Master of Education
7	Mr. MS	Head of HRD	31	Bachelor of Computer Science/ Information System
8	Ms. S	Head of Student Service	37	Bachelor of Economics
9	Mr. BRA	Head of Data Center & Management Information System (MIS)	27	Bachelor of Computer Science/ Information System
10	Ms. AAZ	Chemistry Laboratory Assistant	29	Bachelor of Agricultural Technology
11	Mr. GS	Coordinator of Cleaning Service	29	Master of Education
12	Ms. DDA	Dormitory Receptionist	24	<i>unidentified</i>
13	MS. HMF	Receptionist	23	Bachelor of Communication Science
14	Mr. YA	Coordinator of Security	39	Bachelor of Engineering
15	Mr. HRD	Security Officer	25	<i>unidentified</i>

The main source of data in this research were the results of questionnaire given to the participants. It was used to expose the participants' attitude toward English. The questionnaire was in the form of close-ended questions containing five different categories with various numbers of statement. The first sheet of questionnaire consisted of three different categories. The first category comprises the learners' belief of learning English, the second comprises the learners' belief of speaking English, and the third comprises the learners' activities in English classes during secondary school. The second questionnaire covered two other categories. The first comprises the learners' perception of the best way in learning English, and the second comprises the learners' skill that needs to practice the most and the least. To complete the questionnaires, participants could choose more than one response or sort the statements reflecting themselves depending on the questionnaire (see Appendix).

Alongside with the questionnaire, we also used field-notes and documentation to observe the learners' English skill during the lesson and focus group discussion. The field-notes were used to record the students' activities and opinion, and the documents were in the form of students' worksheets. They were used to reveal if there was any gap between their observable skills and their perceptions. These additional data were required to acquire supporting details for making conclusions.

In this research, the questionnaires were distributed personally to the participants to fill in directly on the spot. Next, in a focus-group discussion, we briefly asked the reasons behind the selections to ensure that the participants understood the questions well and responded consistently. This step was conducted using researcher's field notes. Then, the learners were asked to do some activities including oral presenting, writing short compositions, reading passages, and listening to songs and dialogues in a classroom context. These activities aimed at maintaining the conformity between the perceptions from the questionnaire and the actual proficiency.

After collecting data, the results from the questionnaires were analyzed using simple statistics to find out the dominant pattern from the participants. Second, the learners' attitude toward English learning were concluded based on five categories. After that, the collected documentation was investigated by comparing the learners' questionnaire responses with their actual proficiency.

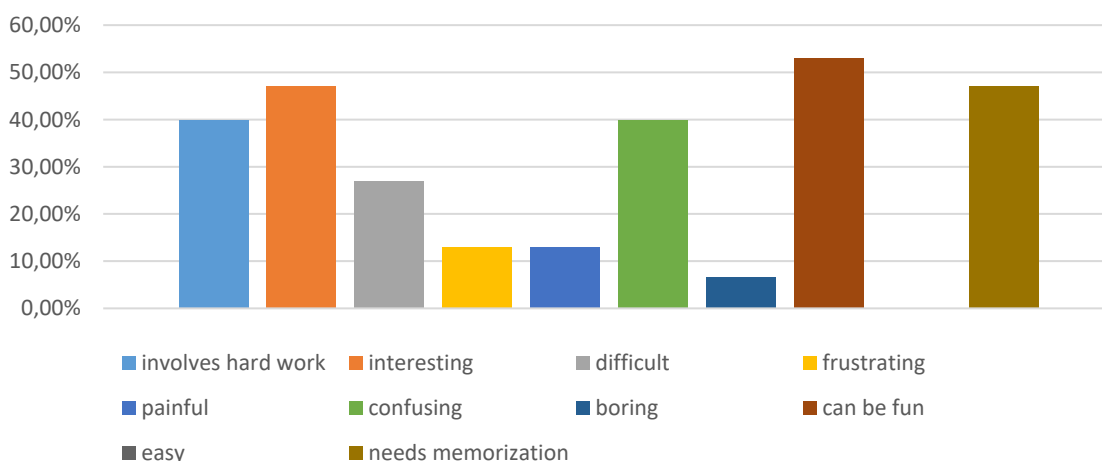
In presenting the findings, some charts were used to show the patterns with percentage to represent the number of the participants. In this case, the data were not analyzed using statistics that required numerical data but in description. The interpretation of the participants' perception on English learning were assessed from possible different sources as well as using various techniques of data collection and instruments. These characteristics of generating theory, natural setting, verbal data, and human instrument are associated with qualitative research (Latief, 2013).

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

After analyzing the data, some patterns regarding the participants' responses to the questionnaire were found. The findings are presented according to the order of the research problems.

**The Learners' Beliefs of Learning English**

The following figure, Figure 1, summarizes the results from the first category related to the learners' belief of learning English.



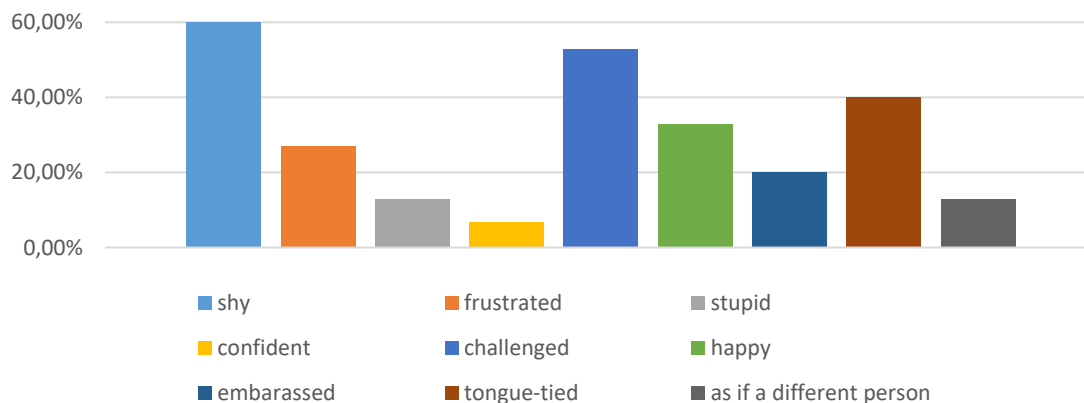
**Figure 1. The Learners' Belief of Learning English**

Figure 1 above shows that 53 % participants, or 8 of 15 learners, thought that learning English could actually be fun. Seven participants believed that English is interesting. However, 7 participants thought that English lesson made them memorize many things. In addition, 6 participants thought that English is confusing or sometimes involves hard work. On the other hand, very few participants felt that learning English was difficult, frustrating, painful, or even boring. None of the participants thought that English was easy.

The results of this research indicated that most learners would believe that English was not easy at all, but learning it in classrooms could be fun and interesting. Only a few thought that learning English was the opposite. It could be a good indicator that fun activities during the process of teaching and learning was present.

**The Learners' Beliefs of Speaking English**

As for the second category related to speaking English, Figure 2 summarizes the results below.



**Figure 2. The Learners' Belief of Speaking English**

Figure 2 shows how 60% participants, or 9 of 15 participants, would feel shy to speak English in front of other people. Despite being shy, more than half of the participants felt challenged to speak English in public. In contrary, only one participant (6.7%) had confidence to speak English with other people.

Next, according to Figure 2 regarding the participants' feeling when speaking English, only few of them felt stupid or frustrated doing it. Most participants felt shy to speak in front of audiences. During the focus group discussion, they admitted that their biggest concern was fear of making mistakes. Most participants hesitated when they were invited to speak or present orally at class. One of participants even confessed that she was jittery and having cold sweat when asked to present information about herself. The feelings of anxiety, shyness, and low self-confident often become barriers in speaking English (Asworo, 2019).

This condition was often caused by teacher's method which tend to be teacher-centered and not interactive. The participants acknowledged that they did not perform English actively in their previous classes at secondary school because their teachers did not require them to do so. In reality, their English teachers used *Bahasa Indonesia* more often than English during lessons. The unfamiliarity of using English in English classes made students not confident with their own ability. It is, then, the English teachers' responsibility to make students comfortable to speak and encourage them not to be afraid of making mistakes, so that learners can bring out their best without having stage fright.

### The Learners' Activities in English Classes during Secondary School

Participants' experiences in coming to the previous English classes during secondary school are shown in Figure 3.

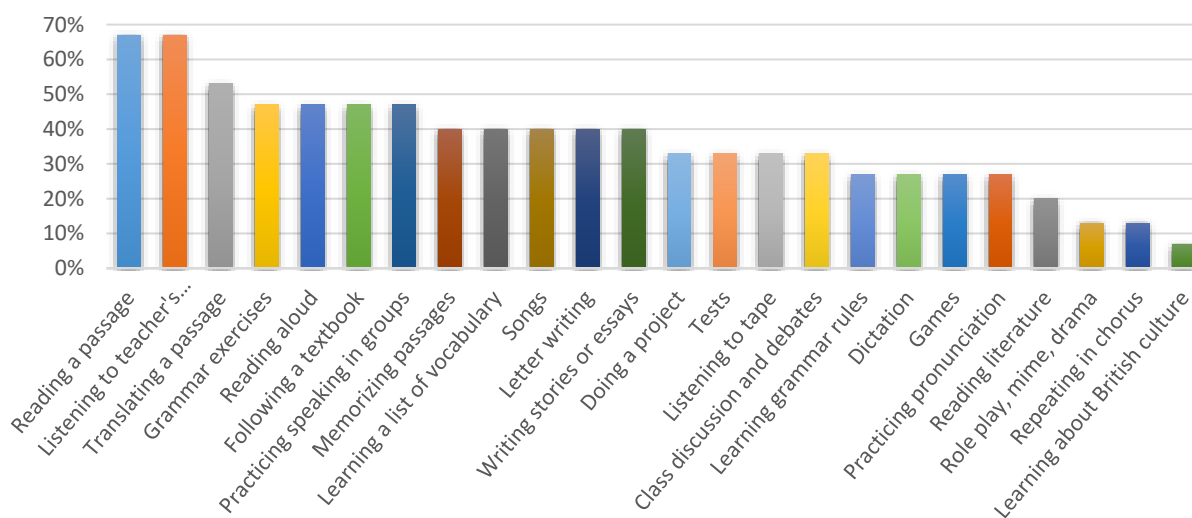


Figure 3. The Learners' Activities in English Classes during Secondary School

In Figure 3, it can be seen that there were only three out of twenty-four class activities in which more than half of the participants have experienced. It implies that most participants were never involved in varied English class activities. The prominent activities experienced by participants were reading passages and listening to the teacher's explanation. In contrast, only a few participants had engaged in activities such as reading literature, learning British culture, and performing role play, mime, and drama.

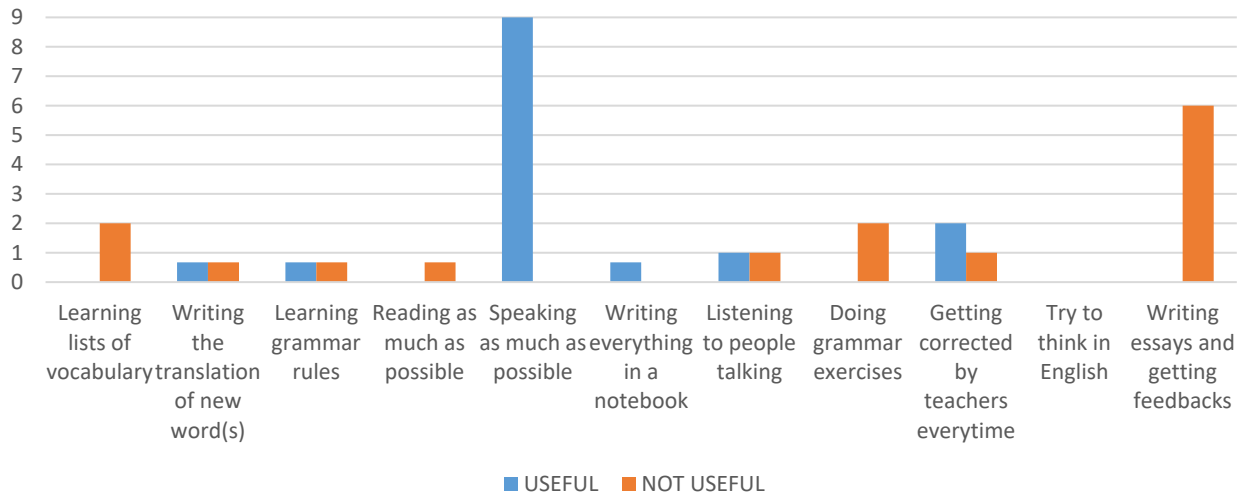
Based on the results shown in Figure 3 related to the participants' experience in engaging the class activities, they actually did not experience varied methods of learning English during the class. Most participants engaged in activities such as reading passages and listening to teachers' explanation, even though these two activities were often considered less student-centered.

On the other hand, more student-centered activities such as doing project, role playing, writing letters, games, discussing and debating, and writing stories were not offered in class and were only experienced by fewer than six participants. It means that although the participants expected English could be fun, their past English teachers did not provide them with many fun activities. Based on our observation, participants did enjoy interactive activities like role play and games. In one game, for example, participants were asked to group and made descriptions about three different foods. Later, the group would deliver the descriptions to the other groups to guess what the name of the food was. All participants were enthusiast and active during the game. In the end of the game, the participants were able to acquire new vocabulary, know how to describe things, cooperate with group members, and of course, enjoy the learning activity. One of the participants commented that such simple game was all fun. She added that that was her first time doing the game. The game was fun because they could describe

something close to their daily life, or they got the chance to show off their knowledge about food while mastering English grammar and vocabulary.

**The Learners’ Perception of the Best Way in Learning English**

Related to the ways to learn English, Figure 4 has summarized the results in the following.



**Figure 4. The Learners’ Perception of the Best Way in Learning English**

The Figure 4 shows that 60% participants, or 9 of 15 participants, thought speaking as much as possible was the most useful way to learn English. On the other hand, 40% participants, or six of them, thought that writing essays and getting feedbacks from the teacher were the least useful way to learn English.

Figure 4 describes some ways of learning English that the participants later decided which the most useful way and the least useful way was. Out of eleven ways, most participants agreed that the most useful way to learn English was speaking as much as possible in the class. It signifies that although spoken English was more difficult than written English (Arta, 2018), students wanted to speak English much (to the best of their ability) during English classes (Handayani, 2015). As for the least useful way to learn English, many participants shared the same opinion about writing essays and getting feedbacks from teachers. Six participants believed that these two combined methods would not be able to help them improved significantly.

Based on the focus group discussion, all participants believed that being able to speak in English is more important than being able to write in it. That was why the participants preferred more speaking materials and did not favour the writing-related methods. Moreover, the occupations of the participants require them to communicate orally a lot, so they thought that they needed more speaking practices to improve their skill. The need and importance of practicing speaking frequently for learners are supported by research on university students conducted by Amrullah, Vianty, and Fiftinova (2018).

**The Learners’ Skill That Needs to Practice**

Last, results related to the most difficult aspect of English language is shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5. The Learners’ Skill That Needs to Practice**

Based on Figure 5, 9 of 15 participants believed that grammar is the most challenging aspect that they needed to improve. In the opposite, 5 participants were confident with their reading skills.

In the last category, as described in Figure 5, participants were asked to select which aspect of English language that they were most confident with, and which aspect they thought the most difficult to master. The result shows that more than half participants felt that they needed to practice English grammar more. Komara and Tiarsiwi (2021) in their study found that hundreds of English learners in various educational level also perceived English grammar as difficult but important to learn. On the other hand, when asked about the language aspect they were most confident with, the answers were varied. However, many participants thought that they almost had no problems with their reading skills.

With regard to the most participants' confidence on their reading skills, the result of the observation verified that the participants' comprehension in most passages was sufficient. It was true on the condition that the passages did not contain difficult words or vocabulary they were not familiar with. Many participants could generally solve questions related to passages, but they failed to understand some obviously easy words which would eventually interfere with their reading comprehension. Looking at the participants' perception on their vocabulary mastery, it seems that the need to learn English vocabulary was underestimated. In point of fact, vocabulary mastery should be as important as of grammar, and acquiring it naturally could improve students' overall skills of English (Herwiana & Agustina, 2017).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The results of questionnaire and focus-group discussion claimed that adult learners shared the same idea of how learning English could be fun with varied activities and learning methods. However, most participants did not experience such activities in their secondary schools. The lack of student-centered activities made learners shy when performing English in public. Therefore, the learners believed that speaking as much as possible is the best way to learn a language. The observation showed that the learners' overall speaking skill was considered problematic since they troubled to do simple introduction in English. In contrary, based on the focus-group discussion and questionnaire, learners believed thought that the biggest challenge in learning English was mastering the grammar accurately. It was hard for learners to create simple sentences both orally and in writing.

The fact that the adult learners now face difficulties in using English suggests that current English teachers must do things differently for the sake of students' improvement. First of all, teachers should improve their teaching skills by providing students with various and interesting teaching aids and class activities. The activities should be more student-centered, so that all students can partake actively in the learning process. The habit of actively engaging in class activities is expected to make students confident and have no doubts about their abilities. This habituation will also make students not easily lose their English skills long after they left school. As many learners perceived grammar as the most difficult language aspect, teachers should make use of combined methods of implicit and explicit grammar teaching. Last, for teachers are the main facilitator for students learning, teachers need to avoid using *Bahasa Indonesia* too often to create a supporting environment for students' success in learning English.

Last, due to the small number of this research participants, the sample was not enough to represent Indonesian adult learners in general. Therefore, it is advised for future researchers who want to conduct similar research to include more adult English learners as participants, so that generalization can be made better.

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APPENDIX  
Questionnaire 1

**Learning a Language: Experience**

Think about your previous experience of learning a language. Tick the sentences that are true for you:

Learning a language ...

- Involves hard work
- Is interesting
- Is difficult
- Is frustrating
- Is painful
- Is confusing
- Is boring
- Can be a lot of fun
- Is easy
- Comes naturally
- Requires a lot of memorization

When I am speaking a foreign language, I:

- Feel shy
- Feel frustrated
- Feel stupid
- Feel confident
- Feel challenged
- Feel happy
- Feel embarrassed
- Feel tongue-tied
- Feel as if I am a different person

Learning a language in class involves:

- Reading a passage
- Translating a passage
- Reading literature
- Writing grammar exercises
- Doing a project
- Learning about British culture
- Learning grammar rules
- Dictation
- Listening to the teacher
- Acting a play or a dialogue
- Memorizing passages
- Reading aloud
- Learning lists of vocabulary
- Frequent tests
- Role play, mime, and drama
- Following a textbook
- Letter writing
- Practicing speaking in pairs or groups
- Listening to a tape
- Games
- Repeating in chorus
- Practicing pronunciation
- Class discussion and debates
- Songs
- Writing stories or essays

## Questionnaire 2

### WHAT KIND OF LANGUAGE LEARNER ARE YOU?

I. Try to number the sentences in order

1= most useful way for me

11= least useful way for me

Which do you think are the best ways to learn English?

- Learning lists of vocabulary by heart
- Writing down the translation of every new word or phrase
- Learning grammar rules, with example sentences
- Reading as much as possible in class
- Speaking as much as possible in class
- Writing everything down in a notebook and learning it
- Forgetting about grammar and listening to people talking instead
- Doing lots of grammar exercises
- Getting the teacher to correct you every time you say a sentence
- Trying to think in English and not translate into your own language
- Writing essays and getting them corrected by the teacher

II. What aspects of language do you feel you need most help or practice with? Number them in order: 1=need to practice the most; 7= need to practice the least

- |              |                 |
|--------------|-----------------|
| • Grammar    | • Speaking      |
| • Vocabulary | • Writing       |
| • Reading    | • Pronunciation |
| • Listening  |                 |