Explaining successful language learning in difficult circumstances

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ABSTRACT
This paper considers the special challenges facing learners of English in developing country contexts, and asks why a few individuals succeed in achieving competence in English where the majority more understandably fail. While research theory has shed light on individual learner differences such as aptitude, motivation and learning strategies, there has been very little empirical investigation of whether these factors can explain L2 achievement in environments where exposure to and use of the L2 are severely limited. At the same time, while it is now recognised that classroom behaviour must be understood in its social and cultural context, there has been less interest in how context shapes and constrains out-of-classroom learning behaviour, arguably more important where formal educational provision is wanting. This article reports on a small-scale exploratory study into the attitudes, learning behaviour and L2 achievement of 16 students in provincial Indonesia. Analysis of interview data shows that formal and informal learning opportunities are indeed scarce, frustrating the majority of English learners. The few individuals who have overcome these difficulties demonstrate a personal investment in learning, and the autonomy and resourcefulness to pursue their goals independently.

Introduction
In EFL settings, an unfortunate but commonly found paradox is this: Where English language competence is potentially most valuable to individuals and their families, it is also most difficult to attain. Although hard evidence is lacking (Smith 2000), it is likely that English, along with other educational improvements, can benefit disadvantaged communities in the developing world by giving individuals access to more rewarding jobs, and by making societies more attractive to investment. But such communities are often unable to provide the conditions in which language skills can develop. Low levels of exposure to the language in remote EFL contexts deny learners comprehensible input, while opportunities to use the language in real communication, especially in spoken communication, are rare. In educational institutions, morale may be low, resources for individual or collective study may be scarce, and teachers themselves may lack the language skills and methodological awareness to improve their pupils’ English.
These are the conditions found in many provincial areas of Indonesia. Government and international donors have long complained of inadequate levels of English among university graduates (for example, Sinclair and Webb 1985; Priyadi and Ismuadi 1998). Data from the University of Jambi, in Sumatra, indicate that about 75 per cent of students enter university with no more than ‘elementary’ level proficiency even after six years of English at school (Lamb 2000). Universities themselves rarely provide more than four credits (64 hours maximum) of English instruction for non-English majors, with the result that students are unable to read the English language textbooks in their subject areas, are thereby denied access to further language learning opportunities (as well as contemporary subject knowledge), and finally enter the labour market without the economically valuable asset of English proficiency.

Yet a small minority of students do succeed in achieving a degree of communicative competence in English by the time they reach university. If we can discover what enables these few individuals to transcend the contextual constraints, we may be able to better help the majority who fail to do so, and who carry the burden of their failure with them throughout their working lives.

As an entry point into this complex area, I returned to the University of Jambi, Sumatra, where I had worked from 1997–1999, to investigate the previous language learning experiences of students. By asking them for their own views on why they have succeeded or failed to learn English thus far in their lives, I hoped to find preliminary answers to the following two questions:

• What learning opportunities do learners of English find in this provincial EFL context in a developing country?

• Why are some learners able and/or willing to take advantage of these opportunities, according to their own reports, while others are not?

The next section explores the issues behind these two questions in more depth and reviews relevant contributions in the academic literature. This is followed by a presentation of the data, and a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research.

**Learners and learning**

**LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES**

For the majority of adolescents in developing countries, as in the developed world, school is intended to be the primary site of foreign language learning. But school classrooms obviously differ widely in the extent to which they support the learning of language. In Indonesian junior and senior high schools, pupils learn English for up to six years, but lessons are only four hours per week, take
place in poorly resourced classes of 40 students or more, and may be taught by a teacher whose own L2 competence is limited.

It is not easy to predict what contribution the school classroom actually makes to the language learning of young Indonesians. As Breen has long argued (for example, in Breen 1985), and social constructivist studies are beginning to show (for example, Donato and McCormick 1994), what is overtly taught may have less impact on pupils’ ultimate L2 attainment than the attitudes and learning behaviours which are the product of the underlying culture of the language classroom and have been established over time through patterns of talk and routines of action. Moreover, ethnographic studies conducted in non-western EFL settings, including Indonesia, have shown how school classrooms may have important non-pedagogic functions for teachers and learners (for example, Holliday 1994; Chick 1996; Coleman 1996). It is possible school has a mainly indirect influence on Indonesian learners’ achievement, in the way that it stimulates or discourages other modes of language learning.

Opportunities for language exposure and use will almost certainly exist outside the formal school classroom – through purposeful study at home, in libraries or in private language schools, through social or work-based contact with English-speaking people, and through access to the mass media, including the Internet. For learners in English-speaking countries such opportunities will be plentiful, as Pickard found for advanced German learners of English in the UK, for example, and Nunan for Asian ESL learners in Australia (Pickard 1996; Nunan 1990). But even in EFL settings, out-of-class learning may contribute significantly to successful learners’ progress. Littlewood and Liu’s (1996) study of Hong Kong students found that many used a variety of out-of-class learning strategies, a finding corroborated by Yap with secondary school students in the same city (1998). However, as Benson (2001: 203) admits in his examination of language learning autonomy, there is a ‘dearth of studies in this area’, and this is especially true of developing country contexts where resources are likely to be much more restricted.

DIFFERENTIAL INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS

Yet as Larsen-Freeman (2001: 12) says, ‘some learners will succeed when the conditions of learning do not appear conducive to success’. We need to consider what qualities distinguish these few from the under-achieving majority. There is now a considerable research literature exploring individual differences in language learning, though again it has been mainly focused on the formal study of languages in the developed world (for example, Skehan 1989; Ellis 1994; Breen 2001). Empirical studies of individual learner differences in developing country contexts are rare. Wen and Johnson report a study of English
achievement-related variables among Chinese university students, intended partly to ‘throw new light upon assumptions about language learners and language learning derived primarily from research conducted in the West’ (1997: 28). They identified several variables as having a direct or indirect effect on success, including gender, L1 proficiency, and use of various learning strategies, including the ability to manage one’s own learning.

But their study focused on learners who were by choice studying the language intensively at university. For the general population of school-age learners in developing country settings, where both formal and informal learning resources are relatively impoverished, it is likely that a different configuration of individual characteristics will be linked to success. For example, although aptitude has been consistently found to be the ‘most successful predictor of language learning success’ (Larsen-Freeman 2001: 38), its traditional definition as a largely cognitive attribute may be inadequate to describe the personal qualities that enable certain individuals to find and exploit scarce learning opportunities.

Gardner (1985) has argued that where learners have to opt in or out of opportunities for learning, motivation is likely to be a stronger predictor of success than aptitude. The traditional integrative/instrumental, intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomies may still have importance here, though our understanding of the concept of motivation has expanded in recent years, in particular to incorporate a temporal dimension which may be particularly relevant where learners have to sustain their efforts over many years (Dörnyei and Otto 1998). In addition there has been a recognition of the important role played by social context in shaping an individual’s motivation to learn (Norton 2000).

Almost certainly, successful learners would need a degree of autonomy, to engage in ‘long-term self-initiated learning in isolation from teachers and other learners’ (Benson 2001: 62). It has sometimes been argued, however, that autonomy is culturally conditioned, or at least it may take different forms in the ‘collectivist societies’ of Asia than it does in the West (Littlewood 1999). In such long-term endeavour, success would also depend on learners’ ability to manage, or self-regulate, their own learning, which in turn would rely largely on a base of metacognitive knowledge – that is, an understanding of themselves as learners, of the value of different learning tasks, and of available learning strategies (Wenden 2001).

Recently, researchers have tried to reevaluate the notion of the ‘good language learner’ from a sociocultural perspective, and have argued that ‘internal characteristics of the learners [were less important] than the characteristics of their social interactions as well as the practices in the communities in which they were learning English’ (Norton and Toohey 2001: 313). Norton, for
example, found that the most successful learner among the adult immigrants she studied in Canada was not necessarily the brightest or most active, but the one who ‘was able to negotiate entry into the Anglophone social networks in her workplace’ (ibid). Although their work was based in a very different setting – ESL in the developed world – we may speculate that young Indonesians’ access to available learning resources will also be the product of a subtle interaction between their personal attributes and their positioning within their families, their institutions and the wider community.

An interview study of Indonesian students

My intention was to conduct a pilot study of successful and unsuccessful learners in order to identify which of these factors, or indeed any other factor not reviewed above, was worthy of further, deeper exploration. Having conducted research into students’ learning strategies in the previous year using a questionnaire, I found the responses disappointingly uninformative and therefore decided to conduct interviews with a much smaller sample. As I was already familiar with the context, I was able to use a ‘focused’ interview format (Cohen et al 2000: 290), in the form of a checklist of general questions about their language learning experience and, where necessary, I asked respondents for clarification or elaboration of their comments.

A total of 16 undergraduates, ten male and six female, from three different faculties (economics, agriculture and animal husbandry), were interviewed, and were grouped according to their achievement in learning English. The first two groups (of five and six students respectively) represent random selections from the bottom quartile and top quartile of the typical freshman range of English proficiency, based on their scores on a standardised placement test I gave them. The third group consisted of second- and third-year students who were identified as proficient in English by university lecturers and who were serving on the committee of a new English self-access centre (SAC) at the university. This group represented exceptional high achievers. Interviewees’ personal data are summarised in Table 1.

Interviews were in Bahasa Indonesia for the low-achieving students, and in English for the two other groups. They lasted from 15 to 25 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed. The comments of the three groups of students (low, middle and high achievers) were then analysed and compared. For many of the students, this was their first conversation with a westerner, so, even more than usual, this interview data needed to be examined carefully for possible self-deceptions, and for conscious or unconscious convergence with the perceived views of the interviewer.
Table 1: Student groups by gender, ethnicity and religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Religion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low (5)</td>
<td>2M, 3F</td>
<td>4 Malay Jambi</td>
<td>5 Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Javanese</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle (6)</td>
<td>4M, 2F</td>
<td>2 Malay Jambi</td>
<td>3 Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Batak</td>
<td>2 Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Chinese</td>
<td>1 Buddhist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (5)</td>
<td>4M, 1F</td>
<td>2 Malay Jambi</td>
<td>3 Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Malay Lampung</td>
<td>1 Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Chinese</td>
<td>1 Buddhist</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Results

WHAT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES ARE AVAILABLE?

Almost all students express dissatisfaction with their formal school English classes. One of the low group (S3) states: ‘The time was too little and we weren’t active enough, because there were too many pupils.’ Other low-level students complained of being ‘left behind’ in class by teachers who spoke in English. Thus S6 notes that ‘sometimes the teachers don’t look to see if the students have understood or not, (s)he just keeps on teaching …’ (and as a result they are left floundering in a sea of incomprehension ‘… it’s difficult to ask the teachers anything, so I try to find the answers myself, so, it’s very complicated to learn English’.

By contrast, the middle and higher groups complained of teachers who were not themselves competent in English (S14: ‘all my teacher not really mastering English’), or who didn’t use it in class (S2: ‘the teacher is quite seldom to use English’). Teachers evidently find it difficult to individualise learning in large mixed-level classes, frustrating those above and those below the average.

A common view expressed in all three groups is that at school English is just another academic subject. As one (S4) put it, ‘we just get knowledge from the teacher … for example, if it’s Tuesday it’s English language, there’s a textbook, with words to note down …’. To learn language skills, the students take it for granted that it is necessary to take a private course, as had 13 out of the 16 students, including all of the top group:

I: How come your English is so much better than theirs [that is, other students]?

S12: I like English. From [the time] I was in Junior High School I was taking a course …

The most common time for taking a private course in English was in the first year of junior high school (age 13–14), which is also the time when most children start learning English in formal school.
Although this might indicate that success is denied to those who cannot afford extra tuition, private school courses did not escape criticism either. Several students complained of poor teaching on such courses, such as an excessive focus on grammar and vocabulary, and three of the top five students only studied privately for less than six months. In fact, only three students claimed to have studied privately for more than a year, and to have benefited unequivocally. This suggests that taking a private course is not necessarily a primary cause of proficiency, but reflects a will to learn – either from the students themselves or their parents.

In general, student comments suggest that public education fails to provide opportunities to learn how to use English, and proves to be a generally negative experience. Yet, because English lessons are no better or worse than other school subject lessons, and because a distinction is made between English as an academic subject and as a practical skill, this negative experience does not necessarily affect their motivation to learn the language. As the highest achieving student (S16) put it, his teachers ‘didn’t really have the good qualification of teaching. Well they have the degree but they don’t really know how to teach … but they don’t seem to influence me in learning English’. Conversely, some comments show that where the experience is positive, school can influence later language learning success, even if they actually learn little English while at school. For example, four of the middle group, who had performed relatively well at school, mentioned particular teachers who had helped them. Similarly, one of the top group (S12) complimented one of her school teachers as follows: ‘her English is … like the English woman … She always ask us to speak English in the class or outside’. Another high-achieving student acknowledged that, potentially, ‘the way the teachers behave here is really much improving for the students’. Even one of the low group (S6) admitted that ‘if the teacher gives an enjoyable lesson, I feel happy, and I’m really interested in studying’.

All but two of the students (both in the low-achieving group) claimed to have learned some English outside the classroom (not counting homework from school). At its most minimal, this learning activity was looking up an English word in a dictionary; at the other end of the scale, some claimed to meet regularly with friends to practise their English together. The range of activities shows that even in this provincial setting it is possible to gain access to English; the problem is that it is usually authentic, unsimplified English, as in magazines, films and the Internet, and the majority of learners never reach the threshold level where they can begin to make sense of this language and gain comprehensible input.

All the various learning activities mentioned by the students are categorised and presented in Table 2.
Table 2: Language learning activities outside the classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning activities</th>
<th>No. of mentions by group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking casually with friends/peers/sibling</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading novels/textbooks/magazines/bible</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using email or the Internet</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying grammar/vocabulary by oneself</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a dictionary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV/films in English</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining an English ‘club’</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to English on local radio (incl. songs)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking to foreigners in Indonesia</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking to oneself</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing a diary</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used English abroad</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never learns or uses English</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the middle- and higher-achieving students all mentioned a number of different learning activities, they did not show great interest in the process of learning itself or any sophisticated understanding of it. The way this student talked is typical:

I: You said that you learnt English mainly by yourself, can you tell me about what you did?

S15: Well I most like reading in English by myself, or maybe talking with my friend like A ____, yeah mostly like that and … sometimes I teach my little brother in English and it makes me realise ‘Oh I remember that’ …

I: You said you read things by yourself, what kinds of things do you read?

S15: About the grammar, vocabulary

I: I see

S15: About the text and the word that I don’t understand what does it mean … I try to find out in a dictionary

I: So do you have books at home?

S15: Books?

I: Books in English, on English, about English?

S15: Yeah a few books
WHY ARE SOME LEARNERS MORE ABLE OR WILLING TO TAKE THE OPPORTUNITIES?

While the number of respondents is very small, Table 2 does indicate a difference between the high-achieving group and the others. Many of the students’ comments suggest that they see learning English as essentially a social activity. One of the middle group of learners (S8), for example, uses social reasons to explain why he has failed to learn English: ‘my reason, no person to practise my English … it’s my difficult to learn.’ Another, (S12), complained that ‘my situation not allow me to speak English or study English a lot I think because my friends [just say] “let’s go to the market”, as if the possibility of his learning English depended on a joint agreement among his friends to do so. It is notable in this regard that the new university self-access centre is not being used for individual study in the way such centres are used in western countries, but for group activities such as story-telling and game-playing. More solitary activities such as reading books or magazines, and studying grammar or vocabulary are mentioned by almost all the successful learners, but by only two and one respectively of the other learners. This suggests that perhaps, in a culture where sociability and cooperation are highly valued, they showed a greater willingness to act alone.

There is some evidence that those who do try to use English have to pay some social costs. One of the middle group (S1) commented: ‘sometimes people make fun of us if we use English’, while a high-achieving learner (S12) remarked that she does not speak English with her friends because they are not as good as her and ‘I don’t want to membanggakan diri’ (make oneself seem arrogant). Again, it is noticeable that only members of the high-achieving group said that they had joined an ‘English club’. Virtually every Indonesian university and many schools have such associations, set up and run by students. Possibly the value of these clubs lies not only in the language practice they offer, but also in protecting members from outside scrutiny and scorn, helping to sustain their motivation.

In fact, motivation appears to be remarkably high among all groups, with every student claiming that knowing English is important to them. This is true even for those who recognise they have failed utterly to learn it so far. This student’s response, translated from Bahasa Indonesia illustrates this:

I: Is English important to you?
S3: Of course, very important (laughs)
I: Why?
S3: Because in every lesson English is used, if you want to read books, many use English now, for computers you need English …
Furthermore, all the respondents describe their enthusiasm for English in similar ways. Below is the response given by one of the high-achieving students to the same question:

I: Is English important for you?
S15: Yeah very important for me
I: Why?
S15: Well, the first reason I think, almost everyone says it’s globalisation; and in economics we usually face texts in English … Or maybe if I go abroad someday maybe … I really need this English I think

Comments suggest that the learners’ motivation is overwhelmingly ‘instrumental’, and English is seen as useful for academic or general work and career purposes. Where more ‘integrative’ motives are expressed, they refer more to an amorphous global culture rather than a particular national one, or belonging to the ‘in-crowd’, as this student (S12) suggests: ‘Last month I went to Bandung for a holiday and I … like with the people in Bandung because they can speak English … most of the students especially they are very clever.’ Where students do mention communication with other people as a motive, they all talk about ‘foreigners’ in general rather than British, American or Australian native-speakers.

Attitudes towards English-speaking peoples and culture were not noticeably more positive in the higher groups. Praise for the West’s technological achievements was moderated by perceived moral deficiencies. In fact, the high-achieving students were both more admiring of the West’s technological and educational achievements, and more critical of their immorality. Below is a typical exchange:

I: What is your opinion of western countries, of western …?
S16: Culture?
I: Yeah
S16: Western culture like … not married or having free sex? … yeah the negative doesn’t really influence me, I mean they got negative culture compared with our eastern culture but at least they got systematical way of thinking …

Not surprisingly none of the lower group said that they found learning English enjoyable, and in fact several expressed great frustration or embarrassment at their lack of progress. This student (S4) was typical in his pained confession:

I have to be considered as incompetent in English, sir, and I often wonder, sir, how can I become fluent … When I see you speaking English fluently, I really want to be like that, sir, but at the moment I have no ability … I just don’t know the method of becoming fluent in English.
By contrast, three of the middle group expressed an intrinsic pleasure in learning or using English. Curiously, only one of the high achievers explicitly mentioned this, but their pleasure in using the language was evident in their eagerness to be interviewed for this study, and in their significantly higher volume of talk.

Finally, although none of the interviewees’ parents were able to speak English, five students in the middle and higher groups, and none of the lower group, acknowledged the importance of ‘significant others’ as part of their motivation for learning English. Of these, three mentioned parents as deliberately encouraging them to learn English, as one put it, because ‘they want me to get success in life’ (S8). Of the other two students who mentioned the importance of others, one said that an uncle taught him some English at a young age in the face of mild parental disapproval, while the most fluent English speaker (S16) recalled an inspiring childhood friend: ‘the way he talks seems to be error … but at least he give me the willingness or the spirit to talk.’

Discussion

In this section of the paper I discuss these results in relation to the two research questions posed earlier.

**WHAT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES DO STUDENTS OF ENGLISH FIND IN THIS PROVINCIAL DEVELOPING COUNTRY EFL CONTEXT?**

The results indicate that the public education sector contributes little towards young Indonesians’ English language skills. But if pupils are not learning English in their school English classes, what are they learning? Donato and McCormick (1994) claim that language learning strategies develop ‘as a by-product of classroom culture’, so we need to examine more closely what teachers and learners actually do together in these classrooms to see if what they do does influence learners’ attitudes and approaches towards learning English outside of school (1994: 462). The interviews reported here hint at some damaging effects: a general antipathy towards formal study of English among the low and middle groups of learners (that is, the great majority of the general population); among the lowest-level learners, a belief that English is almost impossibly difficult; and among almost all, a reluctance to use the language publicly.

However, although private English courses are frequently credited with developing L2 ability, not least by the students themselves, the short length of time that the high-achieving group spent actually studying in such courses casts doubt on this assumption. It seems that determined learners can find learning opportunities in the context of their everyday lives, even where material resources are limited. Unlike Yap’s (1998) study of Hong Kong secondary school
students (reported in Benson 2001: 202), this study does indicate a link between proficiency and out-of-class learning. This could be because, where learning opportunities are scarce, only those students most determined to learn the language actually seek them out and benefit from them. However, a more precise assessment of the relative benefits of different out-of-class learning activities will require longitudinal research, tracking learners over a year or more, perhaps through the use of journals or email communication.

It will also be important to try to identify what counts as a learning opportunity. In promoting an ‘ecological’ view of language learning, van Lier (2000: 257) prefers to use the term ‘affordance’ – signifying ‘the relationship between properties of the environment and the active learner’ – rather than ‘input’, which locates the learning process narrowly inside the learner’s brain. The study of how English is learned in places like provincial Indonesia also foregrounds the importance of the environment, because we have to explore the context with persistence to find out what ‘affordances’ exist. One-off interviews cannot hope to provide the amount of detail needed to give a clear picture of the environment.

We can be fairly certain, however, that this environment is changing. Only five of the learners in this study, all in the middle and higher groups, had so far taught themselves to use computers. But computer technology and the Internet are spreading fast in Indonesia, and could have a galvanising effect on the learning of English in provincial areas. This is because such technology is both a new incentive to learn English, and by far the most powerful available resource for learning it. Indeed, judicious investment in computers by schools may pay rich dividends for English language education by opening up and improving access to a much greater proportion of young learners and multiplying their language learning opportunities.

WHY ARE SOME LEARNERS ABLE AND/OR WILLING TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THESE OPPORTUNITIES, ACCORDING TO THEIR OWN REPORTS, WHILE OTHERS ARE NOT?

According to van Lier, ‘if the language learner is active and engaged, she will perceive linguistic affordances and use them for linguistic action’ (2000: 252). Where the ‘linguistic ecosystem’ is impoverished, however, we can assume that a learner will need to be more than normally ‘active and engaged’. An above average aptitude or mental capacity for language learning, enabling a learner to draw greater sustenance from linguistic affordances, may still be important, but apart from the comment of a high-achieving student (S14) that he had a ‘talent … that not all the people have’ in languages, this study cannot provide evidence to support or refute this. It may, however, offer insights into which learners do become ‘active and engaged’.
Motivation

In this study all the students claimed a strong motivation to study English, but only a few made progress. We therefore need to ask what kind of motivation is most efficacious for successful learning and examine whether an expressed belief in the personal importance of English is equivalent to motivation to learn.

In terms of Dörnyei and Ottó’s (1998) process model of motivation, the comments of all the students constitute expressions of ‘choice motivation’, that is, recognition of the value or importance of English. But Dörnyei and Ottó show that whatever the potency of their chosen goals, these students may never actually seek out opportunities to learn unless other motivational forces are activated too. A low expectation of success might mean that a learner never ‘crosses the Rubicon of action’ and seeks out learning opportunities (Dörnyei 2001: 96). It is interesting to note here that three of the five students in the lower group complained of how difficult English was. Sadly, most aspiring learners in provincial Indonesia may have similarly low expectations of their own learning of English. More optimistically, the implication is that teachers, as well as parents, older siblings and other influential figures, have the potential to convert this initial favourable disposition into purposeful action; and we have seen that several of these students do mention teachers or relations who have played this role.

This action needs then to be sustained over long periods. Recent longitudinal studies of learners in different, but perhaps equally challenging environments (post-communist Hungary, distance education in Thailand), have found that ‘persistence’, or what Williams and Burden call ‘sustaining motivation’ (1997: 121), is crucial to long-term achievement (Nikolov 2000; Sataporn 2000). We need therefore to examine the light that this study throws on what sustains the motivation of teenage learners in provincial Indonesia.

The more successful learners evince, directly or indirectly, a certain pleasure in using the language, which contrasts with the frustration experienced by many of the others. But in a one-off study such as this it is difficult to tell whether this reflects a genuine intrinsic motivation to learn the language, or rather a sense of satisfaction generated by success. Regarding the integrative/instrumental distinction, it is noticeable that the high-achieving students have mainly instrumental motives for learning English, and keep a clear distinction between the language on one hand, which they recognise as valuable, and the culture and people on the other, which they politely subject to criticism. This supports Noels et al’s contention that an integrative orientation is not after all ‘fundamental to the motivational process, but has relevance only in specific socio-cultural contexts’, of which this is not one (2000: 60).
Yet we have also seen that these students’ instrumental motives are vague and diffuse. None have clearly defined goals for their language learning, such as a job that demands English communication skills or a new country to visit, but still they seem to be prepared to pay considerable personal costs in terms of sustained effort and possible social isolation. Norton’s (2000) notion of ‘investment’, which she used to describe the fluctuating degrees to which immigrants committed themselves to learning English in Canada, may be relevant here:

When learners invest in an L2, they do so anticipating that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn enhance their conception of themselves and their desires for the future. Such desires are a complex configuration of memories and hopes, many of which may be scarcely articulated. (Norton and Toohey, 2001: 312)

This interview study did not probe deeply into participants’ conceptions of themselves, but there are indications that this could be a fruitful line of enquiry. Norton’s context of study, where power relations between native and non-native speakers of English were so imbalanced and could intimately affect daily communicative encounters, clearly presents many contrasts with EFL settings such as the one studied here. Nevertheless, these students’ comments show how English is not neutral, but brings with it certain problematic associations and creates anxieties in many learners. It seems to be perceived as immensely useful and representative of appealing qualities like ‘self-discipline’ and ‘technological cleverness’, yet also capable of importing unwanted values. Rampton (1998) has shown how learners and their teachers often deal with ‘problematic difference’ or the sense that the subject carries with it an aura of ‘social, cultural or ethnic otherness’, through ritual behaviour, in or out of class. It is possible that the English language in Indonesia also challenges individuals’ sense of self. This may help to explain the import of social rituals into university English classes that Coleman (1996) observed in Indonesia in the 1980s. Exploring the link between personal and group identity and successful language learning – and the possible role of teachers and other persons as ‘mediators’ between learners and the language – will require in-depth and long-term investigations which track learners as they take (or reject) opportunities to use and practise the language.

**Autonomy and learning strategies**

It should be recognised that the high-achieving learners in this study were essentially self-motivated (even if some were initially inspired by ‘significant others’). According to Ushioda (1997: 41), self-motivation:
… entails taking personal control of the affective conditions and experiences that shape one’s subjective involvement in learning. It entails minimising the damage when these experiences are negative, and maximising the subjective rewards when these experiences are positive.

Thus, by making such progress in adverse conditions, these learners have demonstrated a high degree of personal control over their learning, in other words, autonomy. It has been suggested that ‘… the high degree of authority and control associated with the roles of parents and teachers within the East Asian family and educational traditions will in many cases have provided students with few opportunities to make their own choices in their learning and develop … proactive autonomy’ (Littlewood 1999: 87). This study suggests that, in fact, family and school exercise little influence over students’ learning of English in provincial Indonesia, and that autonomy is probably a necessary precondition to individual success.

However, the origin and nature of this autonomous outlook remain obscure, as the learners in this study appear to lack metacognitive knowledge. As we have seen, even high-achieving students do not, for example, compare and contrast different learning practices or discuss the underlying rationale for their actions, which Sinclair (1999) identifies as key components of metacognitive knowledge found in autonomous learners. It is possible that this was a fault of the elicitation procedure; if learners were asked to introspect while carrying out a learning task, or to keep a retrospective journal on their learning, a different impression of their metacognitive knowledge might emerge.

But the possibility remains that these learners could make faster progress in English if they were given training in self-instruction. As Benson (2001: 185) says, ‘as yet we know little about the ways in which learners go about setting their own agendas in the longer term or about how classroom learning fits in with these agendas’. Where pupils’ initial motivation to learn is high, but time and resources to learn are low, it is arguable that the most important role of school English classes would be to enable learners to seek out and exploit learning opportunities, either individually or more likely, given the preference exhibited here for learning with friends, in peer groups. This means devoting class time to expanding learners’ awareness of language and the language learning process; it is no coincidence that, seizing the opportunity, four of the lower-level students in this study asked me for advice on how to learn English during their interview.

Conclusion
Throughout this paper it has been necessary to acknowledge the small size of the sample of learners observed, and the lack of corroborating data for the
Interview transcripts. Any conclusions, beyond the obvious need for further research, need to be made very cautiously.

The study appears to confirm that the circumstances of foreign language learning in provincial Indonesia are indeed difficult, and that those who succeed manage to do it in spite of, rather than due to, the services of educational institutions. Both state and private education may impact upon individuals’ learning, but do not have a determining effect.

More important are attributes such as a personal investment in learning English, and a willingness and ability to study it autonomously, and these enable individuals to exploit over time what learning opportunities exist in their particular context of learning. Longitudinal ethnographic studies of a limited number of individual learners should help to illuminate the way these personal qualities interact with features of the environment. Meanwhile, large-scale quantitative research could be used to investigate other factors which have been found to distinguish successful and unsuccessful learners in western contexts, such as aptitude, gender, and socioeconomic status.

It is hoped that this study has helped to sharpen the focus for future research into this important but neglected area. For the successful individuals studied here, the rewards will come in terms of better study and work opportunities; but these constitute a small minority. For educationalists concerned with the well-being of all, one way out of the dilemma mentioned at the beginning of this paper is to continue trying to understand better what enables these individuals to succeed, and then help others to help themselves in the same way.

NOTES
1 Quotations from students in the low-achieving group – S3, S4, S6, S10, S11 – have been translated from Bahasa Indonesia.
2 The website http://www.kangguru.org/kgconnection.htm lists over 60 ‘English clubs’ set up in association with Kang Guru Radio English, for example.

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