

FIGHTING FOR A BETTER ACHIEVEMENT OF ENGLISH: WHAT SHOULD INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS DO?

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Abstract

This paper is presented through the lens of two-folded perspectives: the author as a teacher and the author as a learner of English. As a teacher of English, the author will put forward some professional viewpoints in relation with the difficulties that Indonesian students face when learning English and with what they should do in coping with the problems. As a learner, the author will share his own experiences and success stories as a good learner of English in the past. As the title of the paper implies, overall, this paper mainly discusses the major constraints that hinder Indonesian students' EFL learning progress and offers feasible approaches to the challenges to meeting the expectation: a significant success in EFL learning in Indonesia.

Introduction

In Indonesia, English is a foreign language. As the first foreign language, it becomes a compulsory course to be taught in secondary schools and tertiary education in the country. It is undeniable that in the global context, English has played a more and more important role. Mastering the language seems promising, accordingly, especially in pursuing a career. However, to most Indonesian learners of English, it is a “monster”. English is quite difficult to learn. English is very hard to master. Learning English is even “mission” impossible. Some notable factors that make it so, among others, are: cultural backgrounds, language environment, and teachers' performance.

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In spite of the fact above, the existence of successful EFL learners around us and higher performing students in the academic settings give the evidence that the Indonesian EFL students face challenges rather than constraints. There is still opportunity before us. Above all, in regard to the status and function of English in Indonesia, EFL teachers and students constitute two central elements in the education system. So far, much has been discussed about what EFL teachers should do in coping with the English language teaching problems. This paper, however, highlights the roles EFL learners can take in directing their learning. It is important because, as human, learners should be able to empower themselves and take responsibility of their own learning. It is actually something that can be trained at all levels in diverse ways.

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As the title of the paper suggests, overall, this paper discusses the major constraints that hinder Indonesian EFL students' learning progress and offers feasible approaches to those challenges to meeting the expectation: a significant success in EFL learning in Indonesia. For convenience, the ideas are organized into three categories of challenges, that might seem oversimplified and overlapping: cultural backgrounds, language environment, and teachers' performance. In the discussion of cultural backgrounds, for example, customs and beliefs are included. Following discussion of the challenges will be that of proposed approaches to the conditions that are non-conducive to EFL learning progress.

The next paragraphs are dedicated to a brief overview of good foreign language learners. The obvious factors influencing the success of a foreign

language learning include: motivation, attitude, and strategy use (especially the one related to practice).

The issue of motivation is a complex topic. It is one of the most influential factors in producing successful foreign language learning. Although teachers do not create motivation in students, they do create environments that either foster or hinder students' motivation for learning. In general, the stronger the inner drive or motivation an EFL learner has, the better he/she will achieve or perform.

Learner's attitude to the learned language impacts the learner outside the classroom. A favorable attitude would motivate learners to reach their learning goals. Up to this point, it seems the three factors stated are interrelated. Once EFL learners are well-motivated, they will not only learn and use the target language inside the classroom, but also extended to outside the classroom.

To reach the learning goals, good learners will think and make special efforts (thought, behavior, actions) known in the literature as 'learning strategies'. They control the strategies they choose. When they consider a strategy use – either a single strategy or a combination of strategies – ineffective, they redirect it. There are many EFL language learning strategies according to some taxonomies developed within particular perspectives – too many to mention in this narrow space. A few examples can be presented here based on Rubin's taxonomy: memorization, guessing/inductive inferencing, practice, creating opportunities for practice, and production tricks.

In relation to the discussion above, the author's experiences as an EFL learner in the past may be inspiring to note. The author still considers himself to be a learner of English to date, probably an advanced learner. He recalls the days when he struggled, stumbled and fell – by trial and error. However, he enjoyed learning the target language either in or out of class those days and reached a *sense of accomplishment* at the end. These personal experiences, enriched with success stories of some other high-

performing learners of English he used to know, alongside the author's professional views are shared in more details later after challenges' section.

#Challenges

Cultural Backgrounds

The problems encountered by Indonesian EFL students cannot be separated from the students' cultural backgrounds, values, customs, and beliefs. A simple illustration can be borrowed from the literature that says Asians (including Indonesians) are collectivists. Collectivism highly values security, conformity, and universalism. Therefore, Indonesian students are likely to be comfortable achieving goals set by authority figures as long as they can do so while conforming to the group.

For Asian societies, knowledge is traditionally seen as something to be transmitted down through generations and the knowledge is passed down from teachers to students. That is why, in the Asian context, passive learning and teacher-controlled lessons dominate. This lack of emphasis on critical thinking and original thought is evidenced in traditional Indonesian classrooms in which lessons focused on the teacher are extremely ingrained. The real condition has shown that teaching is associated with mainstream, learning is linked to mainstream. Creativity, then, is very rare. Majority of teachers just follow the senior colleagues. Most students just follow what others do. They might believe all should be in harmony with tradition or conform to the rest, and perhaps being different is wrong. Monotonous teaching is nearly everywhere.

Perhaps, it is a pleasure to inspire teachers of English with an old-fashioned work by Postman & Weingartner *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969). Teachers should not worry about being anti-mainstream. Creativity is uniqueness and at times anti-mainstream. It is not hard to imagine, with creative teachers, students would become creative.

Usually, the students feel too shy to speak during a lesson. They also feel uncomfortable to raise their hands, even when they need to. One reason is

that they are afraid of being thought of as ‘sensation hunters’. It is part of collectivism culture too, something that most of us might be unaware of. The students prefer to stay quiet because they do not want to “lose face”. So far, this condition has often been associated with personality problem, especially self-confidence.

Language Environment

As stated earlier, up to now, in Indonesia, English has served as a foreign language. While acquiring a first language is done almost effortlessly, it is not the case in a second or foreign language learning. As a foreign language, English is learned only within classrooms or schools setting. Worse still, English is mandatory at high schools and students live in an environment where knowledge and skills of English are not compulsory for daily communication.

Some people believe that the students’ non-conducive language environment contributes to the low learning outcome. Perhaps, it is true in the past. However, life has changed a lot. It is obvious that students now live within technology-rich society. The challenge relevant to this disadvantaged learning environment for learning EFL is to meet the needs of students who have grown up in a digital world and are heading into different cultural and economic future rich in ever-advancing technology and information. Today’s learners want to connect and communicate constantly and want an environment to support these connections. Forms of communication such as computer chatting or texting allow interaction with a variety of people and material. Using technology in language teaching should have enhanced students’ EFL learning.

Authentic intellectual engagement requires a deeper reciprocity in the teaching-learning relationship where students’ engagement begins as they actively construct their learning in partnership with teachers. Therefore, teachers of English, even though they might not be so technology literate as their students, they can learn alongside the students, helping them

actively to construct their learning experiences and knowledge. With the current inquiry-based, problem-based, exploratory learning curriculum, learning English utilizing digital media and multimedia will be promising. New forms of digital media draw children increasingly toward video games and social media. The following can also help students engage their learning, explore, and construct new knowledge, including the knowledge of English: WebQuests, blogs, wikis, YouTube, and video documentaries.

Teachers' Performance

Teaching is not a simple job. A language teacher should have adequate knowledge of the subject matter he/she teaches, teaching methodology, and adequate skills both in the language use and teaching practice. Many studies (e.g. Marcellino 2008; Yulia 2013) have shown some evidence of the Indonesian EFL teachers' low performance. The following are some of the main issues. Indonesian EFL teachers tend to use Indonesian and/or the local language as the medium of instruction. Teachers do not apply suitable teaching techniques. The teachers teach in monotonous modes.

Many EFL teachers have a relatively poor command of English. They lack vocabulary and expressions as well as mastery of grammar so it makes them speak Indonesian and/or the local language most of the class time. Some of these teachers argue that their students do not understand when English is used as the language of instruction. Actually, they miss the value of using English at least most (if not all) of the time in class. In addition, they do not know the communication strategies. Indeed, it is quite possible that they are not confident to speak in the language they teach. Within the classroom, the use of English as a means of instruction is badly needed to optimize the language exposure. Around the clock, presumably students have limited contact with spoken English outside the classrooms. Besides, as a language teacher, a teacher of English serves as a

model to his/her students. Teachers' oral communication proficiency in class helps students achieve integrative motivation.

While improving teaching techniques can motivate students to learn English, many teachers do not seem aware of teaching methodology. Teaching English should be adapted to the type of learners, level of learners, sort of materials or content, kind of skills, etc. Several teachers tend to quickly slip back into the role of traditional teachers that teach English using the Audio Lingual Method, an approach that has a set of different principles and beliefs from that of the current curriculum.

An extreme illustration is that in TEYL (Teaching English for young Learners), where some teachers tend to employ the techniques best for teaching adults. In many cases, teachers teach the kids English as if they were adults. For example, the teaching lacks fun, songs, and games. Ironically speaking, it gives emphasis on grammar rather than vocabulary development.

Some teachers of English use ineffective methods. A case in point is that of a teacher who trains students' reading comprehension skill by orally asking wh-questions. Students feel bored and tense. In addition, it seems too demanding to check students' reading comprehension orally. Since comprehension is a receptive skill, focus should be on comprehension. It is strange enough to see the fact that in the teaching and learning process, little has been done with reading comprehension skill. In the meantime, reading comprehension in the national exam makes up the largest portion of the tests. So, students find themselves incapable of doing such tasks or are unprepared for a test of this sort later on.

A monotonous teaching technique still plagues the teachers' performance, a common phenomenon in classroom practice today. Students are normally passive in class and respond to the teacher's questions only when asked. Why can't we use techniques that engage students in learning as exemplified below?

Task-Based Activities

One-Way Information Gap

Partner A has a picture. Partner B does not. Partner A describes the picture to Partner B, who draws it entirely from the description.

Two-Way Information Gap

Two students individually fill out their schedules for the upcoming weekend. They then share their schedules orally to find a time when they both are free and can meet for a movie.

Problem-Based Activity

Which Job to Take?

You were a pediatrician in your country but you don't have the English skills or the certification exams to practice medicine in the United States. You need to continue your studies in order to reach your goal. You have two job offers. One is a nurse's aide in the county hospital and you would be working way beneath your potential, but the schedule would be flexible so you could take classes. The second job offer is a case worker and translator for Employment Services. The pay would be quite a bit more than that of a nurse's aide but the schedule is 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. so you couldn't take day classes. You would be helping people in both jobs. Which job should you take?

Why are there no handouts? Why are there no creative media other than regular teaching aids like whiteboard and markers?

Too much class time is devoted to writing activity and instruction. The language teachers do not make the courses interesting. The role of the teachers should be to make the courses meet students' needs and help them improve their language. The speaking (in target language) component is nearly non-existent in the English classes. There should be less writing in the classes and more reading to help them analyze better and there should be more speaking, as oral communication is important especially in the global context.

Teachers of English should realize that motivation is a complex issue, especially when considered in the Asian context. They are required to respond to this with all efforts, for example, by applying a particular motivational strategy. It is a good idea that an EFL teacher successfully teaches a particular group of students who will attend universities in Western countries by the use of music and cultural references in the classroom.

Such a disadvantageous situation above is a challenge to Indonesian EFL students. A challenge is something to be approached, not something to run away from. The following are some facts that the author believes are opportunity and compensation for the disadvantageous EFL learning condition.

#Approaches to the Challenges

Brief Stories from Better Performing Learners

All high achievers of English the author knew have generally shown common characteristics. It sounds interesting to argue that the similarities in characteristics across the better performers of EFL can be used as a reference to solutions to the challenges faced by the Indonesian students learning English. However, it is highly recommended that favorable attitudes toward the target language and, preferably, the culture be present first. It is like “From here, go anywhere.” – the rest is simpler. When favorable attitude toward the target language and culture is there, then, time spent and effort investment is not a big problem anymore on the part of the English learners.

A language consists of four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Skills require practice. An old adage says ‘Practice makes perfect’. All high- achieving learners create environment for practice. A university biology teacher named Bintarti said as follows:

Perkembangan bahasa Inggris saya tidak terlepas dari kegemaran saya menyimak hiburan berbahasa Inggris, seperti

lagu dan film. Tak lupa, saya juga gemar menyimak rekaman pelajaran bahasa Inggris yang berisi percakapan berbahasa Inggris oleh penutur asli. Dan yang tidak kalah pentingnya, saya berusaha menirukan bagaimana penutur di dalam rekaman-rekaman itu melafalkan ungkapan-ungkapan.

The excerpt shows that the learner likes listening to songs and films that use English language, especially whose speakers are native. She also likes shadowing, i.e. repeating after the speech models.

A similar story was told by a Mandarin teacher, Dyah, who attended English class at a university. She told part of her Mandarin learning experience below:

Pertengahan tahun 2013 saya mulai tertarik bahasa Mandarin karena nonton film Mandarin "Meteor Garden" di tv. Saya banyak menyimak dan ini merupakan keterampilan andalan saya hingga kini, selain berbicara. Pelan-pelan saya mulai melafalkan/menyanyikan lagu-lagu dengan bantuan vcd, meski tidak tahu artinya. Bagi saya yang sulit dalam bahasa Mandarin adalah sistem baca tulisnya. Romanisasi juga tidak banyak membantu saya. Oleh karena itu, menyimak, lalu melafalkan apa yang saya dengar adalah sangat membantu bagi saya.

It doesn't matter that the language she said she had been learning was Mandarin Chinese. Learning strategies apply to any language learning. Listening and pronunciation practice were this learner's favorite activities. She used a kind of communication avoidance strategy. Her effort to prioritize listening and pronunciation and delay meaning, reading, and writing worked. She achieved a sense of accomplishment.

Felix, a radio broadcaster, also enjoyed listening to recordings such as songs and films that used English. He commented:

Di mata saya orang yang memiliki kemahiran bahasa Inggris adalah keren. Kesukaan pada bahasa Inggris berawal secara tidak sengaja. Saya senang mendengarkan musik berbahasa asing, khususnya bahasa Inggris. Akhirnya saya terbiasa dengan lirik-lirik tembang berbahasa Inggris. Tidak saya sadari kosakata bahasa Inggris saya bertambah dan bertambah terus.

From the excerpt it can be concluded that a learner of his type has positive attitude toward the target language. In his opinion, having proficiency in

English is cool. His habit led to ever-increasing vocabulary development. Vocabulary is a crucial language component.

He took the initiative to create his environment for learning or practice. He said: *‘Pernah suatu ketika saya mengikuti kursus conversation. Saya mengajak bercakap-cakap dengan teman-teman yang tingkatannya di atas saya.’* His motivation was so strong that he felt challenged to speak with higher-level peers. Productive skill practice with foreigners was also his hobby. He was fond of internet chatting with foreigners.

Luthfi, who was a university administrative officer, had a good cross-cultural insight. He had a drive which is common to other good learners. He practiced his English a lot. He commented:

Dalam upaya mempraktekkan berkomunikasi dalam bahasa Inggris saya berbincang dengan turis asing di objek wisata... Dalam kesempatan lain, ketika saya bersama seorang teman bertemu dengan wisatawan asing yang sedang menikmati panorama alam, teman saya dengan antusias mengajaknya berbicara dalam bahasa Inggris. Rupanya dia merasa tidak nyaman dan terganggu sehingga kesal dan marah. Sewaktu saya nimbrung dia merespon baik dan enjoy berbincang dengan saya. Kasihan teman saya itu, mungkin saja ada yang kurang...

His speaking practice by mingling with foreigners was smooth due to his target language cultural understanding. He was also a risk taker. He was challenged to accept an invitation to take part in the English forums whose participants were secondary school teachers of English. Surprisingly, he turned out to perform the best of all participants although his formal education was lower than the rest. Indeed, it is a matter of practice.

Dealing with the stories shared above, the author had similar experiences that most probably confirm the opportunity or potential they would offer to overcome the challenges facing the EFL learners in Indonesia. First of all, it might be necessary to note that the author studied English very hard in the junior high school because once he had dreamt of becoming a pilot, an ambassador, or (university) English teacher for future career and had a very positive attitude toward English as a school subject later when he was

sitting at the senior high school. He was inspired by one of his English teachers. The teacher spoke like a native speaker of English. Despite the then-structural approach curriculum, he studied the material beyond academic purposes. He learned and used English incredibly during his college period. For more details, here are some past efforts he believes to have led to his present achievement of English:

Hunting for Foreigners

It is something that is consistent with what the good EFL learners above used to experience. It was not by chance that he went to the big town of Solo/Surakarta for his college education. He knew that Solo was the centre of Javanese cultures. Many foreign tourists visited the town. To satisfy his curiosity of having face-to-face communication with foreigners who might have spoken English, imagining a sense of pride to be seen by the local people for doing something very rare, when having no class, he came to (1) a travel agent frequently visited by foreigners, (2) Mangkunegaran palace where twice a week Javanese dance show was held and visited by foreign tourists, and (3) tourists objects, such as historical museums, temples, and other local tourist centers.

Overall, from those activities, the author had chances to learn and use oral English that in some parts had sharpened his acquired knowledge and skills and in other parts improved his proficiency. Even a few tourists, when back home, continued to get in touch through letters, meaning that another skill practice of writing was activated.

Listening to English Materials

In the author's time, learning media were not so well-developed as they are today. He liked collecting recordings of slow English pop songs, native speakers' conversation, and English lessons. Playing-replaying and shadowing used to be part of his favorite activities for years at home even when still sitting at the junior high school. It was the right time for him to

produce the closest possible expressions to the speech models – speakers on the recordings. One thing is that he did not quickly go to the tapescript. A more challenging hobby was listening to a foreign radio program broadcast in English, especially BBC English.

Speaking Alone

To many learners this effort might seem weird. What the author used to pronounce without a speech partner in the boarding house's room might be words and expressions on a reading book, dictionary, hand-writings or notes on a piece of paper. These all aimed to produce fluent English speech or pronunciation.

Translating

The author learnt his lesson from life, and took advantage from living with insufficient stock of money. It encouraged him to work hard and make money while trying to complete his study. One of his efforts was to set up a translation service. Beside the money he got, this job required him to look up dictionaries frequently. Once consulting dictionaries for an English – Indonesian translation, he obtained meaning, pronunciation, and examples of usage. Wonderful! It was very useful. With this translation, he obtained language knowledge and learnt models and styles as well. Again, it was very useful. In an Indonesian – English translation, the author practiced his writing a lot.

Drafting Full of Trial and Error

Putting down ideas while trying the best expressions possible on used papers (maybe one would throw them away into the dustbin) was fascinating to the author. Often, written expressions were crossed out, corrected, and rewritten. Others would find it difficult to follow the flow of his writing before it became improved writing that satisfied him. Only a pen and used papers were needed. Often, few papers were needed to write,

shifting from one paper to another. He enjoyed this way. The most important thing for him was that what was in mind should have been manifested on papers.

Now, much later after all those happened, the author realizes the benefits of having such splendid things as part of his past experience.

Hunting for foreigners or just mingling with them is perhaps the most popular effort and becomes a favorite activity among better performing learners of English in Indonesia. In the literature, it refers to *creating opportunities for practice* strategy (Rubin, 1981). He gave a few examples: creating situation with native speaker, initiating conversation with fellow students, spending time in language lab, and listening to tv, etc. So, Felix, for example, used this strategy very productively. In his full story he stated: *'Saya juga gemar chatting menggunakan bahasa Inggris. Di situ saya berkomunikasi dengan orang-orang asing.'* He was fond of chatting (through the internet) with people from other countries. He used this *creating opportunities for practice* strategy not only by listening to recordings, initiating a conversation with his course friends, but also by creating opportunities for communication with foreigners.

Communicating with foreigners who are in or out of (through the internet) Indonesia is very helpful to all those EFL high performing learners in this country. Listening to recordings is also useful to them. Although foreigners in Indonesia make up a very small percentage in comparison to the whole population of this country, in some places in the entire Archipelago their number is big. EFL learners can visit the tourist places, foreigner business centers, or foreign-based company environments for practicing their English. However, oops! One should understand the foreign culture to be successful in their practice. Practice failure as experienced by Luthfi's friend above is possibly an ignorance of cross-cultural understanding.

In addition to communication with foreigners, scarcity of exposure to English language and culture in Indonesia can be compensated for by accessing the available media. Media such as the internet, recordings,

television programs, and radio programs (e.g. BBC, etc) are nothing exclusive or luxurious anymore at present. Even the technology of multimedia has been at hand anytime, anywhere. Opportunity for practicing listening to English is very easy to find today. The questions are: (1) are learners self-directed to access the right materials?, (2) are learners self-directed to spend enough time accessing the right materials? If not, then they need guidance.

Closely related to *creating opportunities for practice* strategy is *practice* strategy. No efforts should be spared to cope with scarcity or even absence of opportunity for learning and using the target language within this country. The author made an effort that seems strange through speaking alone while reading or listening to English texts. According to Rubin (1981) it refers to *practice* strategy. He mentioned examples such as experimenting with new sounds, repeating sentences until pronounced easily, and listening carefully and trying to imitate. The author's effort was more or less the same as those examples.

The act of speaking alone is, of course, very simple and efficient, yet effective. Everybody can do this, if he/she wants. Together with other strategies (a combination of strategies) such as *monitoring*, *memorization*, or *deductive reasoning*, they can apply this strategy or strategies even when at home or elsewhere. It needs nobody else to apply it with. Fluency, pronunciation, and oral proficiency can potentially be resulted from this strategy use. It is quite possible that few Indonesian speakers of English sound so much like native speakers because they used this strategy. Although it is advised that speaking communicatively is much more important than speaking with foreign accent, it is wrong to ignore the latter. Speaking with native-likeness for some people would give good impression on the part of listeners. For others, speaking with native-likeness would give a great sense of pride. Sure, just like self-esteem, prestige, or respect, special feeling of pride will encourage the speakers to keep on learning and performing better.

Another seemingly weird effort the author took related with hunting for foreigners experience was that in times of oral communication with foreigners, often the author did not understand some words. When this happened, he used to pretend that he did, by nodding or just smiling. In the literature of communication strategy, it refers to *coping* strategy (Terui, 2012). The aim of this strategy use may fall to any of the following categories: (1) protect self-esteem, (2) respond to social pressure, (3) express concern for others' feelings, (4) cope with anxiety, (5) keep conversation flowing, (6) keep conversation open, (7) avoid extra efforts, (8) fill in gaps, (9) make use of (an)other source(s), (10) elicit confirmation, and (11) take advantage of status. The act of pretending occurs due to language barrier. Considering the aims above, clearly, pretending to understand the speaker (while actually one does not) is important.

Actually, no special effort in the so-called learning strategy is weird. It, in many cases, is unique and personal. Successful language learners have insight into their own language learning styles and preferences as well as the nature of the task itself (Wenden, 1991). They adopt a personal style or positive learning strategy that fits their needs and preferences. Another feature that characterizes them is that they take active approach to the learning task. They select learning objectives (what is it for?) for themselves and deliberately involve themselves in the target language. They seek out opportunities to communicate in the target language. Of course, as discussed earlier, opportunities to communicate in English as the target language are open widely either within or beyond classrooms, not limited to speaking to native speakers.

Other most unforgettable experiences that the author shared above, translating and drafting, seem to have taken him mainly to his present peak writing experience. When doing translation he adopted a strategy referred to as *resourcing* (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). O'Malley and Chamot defined this strategy as using target language reference material such as

dictionaries and textbooks. This strategy belongs to cognitive strategies. In translating and drafting, the author dominantly employed *self-monitoring* strategy and *self-evaluation* strategy. O'Malley and Chamot defined self-monitoring strategy as checking one's comprehension during listening or reading or checking the accuracy and/or appropriateness of one's oral or written production while it is taking place, while self-evaluation strategy as checking the outcome of one's own language learning against a standard after it has been completed.

Part of the author's past habit (drafting on used papers) has continued until now. He does it frequently. With those two pieces of experience, he cares a lot about grammar, diction, mechanics, and styles that are acceptable to language in use.

Conclusion and Suggestions

To sum up, it is clear that Indonesian students must take responsibility for their own EFL learning, both within and beyond the classrooms or schools setting. Although they face challenges – the disadvantageous situation for EFL learning – there is still opportunity and compensation for the non-conducive situation. They can turn all efforts into approach to the challenges.

For the sake of EFL learning, students should cope with the negative impact of the cultural background on their EFL learning and try special efforts to achieve goals. The students can take foreign values as long as they are worthwhile and do not oppose existing local values. The Indonesian EFL students can take the benefit of today's rapid progress in media technology for supporting their EFL learning.

All EFL learning experiences, success stories, and opinions shared throughout this paper are inspiring and useful. Attitudes, motivation, and strategies are key factors influencing the achievement of EFL learning. The learners mentioned in the paper can achieve English better, then every student can if also do it if they try.

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