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Research Based Article

## Exploring the Factors Leading to Thai Students' Problems in Learning English Elements

Asfi Aniuranti<sup>1</sup>, M.Happy Nur Tsani<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Purwokerto, South Purwokerto 53144, Indonesia

### KEYWORDS

Learning Problems,  
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### A B S T R A C T

Learning English as a foreign language abroad can be challenging. This phenomenon occurred in Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Purwokerto where seven Thai students studied in the English Language Teaching Department. The students faced difficulties in learning English especially English sub-skills such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. This study aims to explore the causes of Thai students' problems in learning English components. The method employed was a case study with a qualitative approach. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, then analysed using some phases namely familiarizing and organizing, coding and reducing, and interpreting and representing. The result revealed several essential findings. Firstly, the causes leading to pronunciation problems were anxiety, accent confusion, classroom environment, and L1 interference. Secondly, difficulties in learning vocabulary were caused by lack of motivation, learners' peer group, language learner ability, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Thirdly, the factors causing difficulty in mastering grammar were many English grammar formulas, negative attitudes toward grammar, and lack of motivation. Thus, the Thai students' problems in learning English language components were caused by several different factors.

### CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S):

E-mail:

a.anieuranti@unupurwokerto.ac.id\*

## INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language like English is commonly troublesome for many learners. Students' challenges can be caused by several different factors. Setiawan (2017) explains that the factors influencing learning difficulties can be classified into two called internal and external factors. He added that internal factors come from the students themselves, while external factors come from outside the students. Internal factors consist of physical, psychological, and fatigue factors. Then, external factors consist of family, school, and community factors.

Furthermore, Latu in Taweeпадung et al., (2018) mentions four factors causing problems in learning English. They are linguistic, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and classroom and educational factors. Simply put, students' challenges in learning English can be caused by several types of factors.

The worse situation may occur when language learners have to learn a foreign language in a foreign country. This happened in English Language Teaching Department of Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Purwokerto, Indonesia. Seven Thai students studied English in this department. According to Djamarah (2003), learning difficulties are defined as a condition where students cannot learn

naturally due to obstacles. Ahmadi & Widodo (2004) add that difficulties in learning are a condition where students cannot learn as they should. In short, learning difficulties are an unusual condition where students cannot learn with good results due to challenges or obstacles.

In this study, the researchers focused on the factors leading to learning difficulties of English sub-skills called vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. The language elements were chosen due to their importance in language learning process. According to Katawazai et al., (2019), English subskills, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, are the building blocks for the four main skills. The first element is vocabulary, and this is always considered as essential subskill of English. Nothing can be done without the vocabulary, and it is the basis for communication (Dakhi & Fitriya, 2019). Vocabulary has an essential role for every English learner and the language learning process (Hikmah et al., 2022; Sa'D & Rajabi, 2018; Susanto, 2017; Yasin & Jawad, 2015). Limited vocabulary may hinder the communication process or become the source of an unsuccessful process of communication (Alqahtani, 2015; Sparks & Deacon, 2015). In short, vocabulary is a crucial element of English, and the limitation of vocabulary may hamper the communication process.

The second element is pronunciation. Pronunciation is one of the important elements of English. Understandable pronunciation is one of the basic requirements of learners 'competence, and it is also one of the most important features of language instruction (Tiyas et al., 2023). According to Harmer (2003), pronunciation is the first thing that native speakers pay attention to. Grammar and vocabulary are crucial language components, and they might be rendered meaningless if speakers can't pronounce certain components or words well. Aniuranti & Suwartono (2020) add that pronunciation is a crucial element of language learning process.

The third element is grammar or structure. This component is commonly considered as significant component (Ameliani, 2019; Aniuranti & Rizkina, 2019; Effendi et al., 2017; Handayani & Johan, 2018; Nawira et al., 2019; Yuliyanto & Fitriyati, 2019). Therefore, every learner has to get a sufficient notion of grammar. Harmer (2003) argues that communication may suffer if the grammar rules are used too carelessly. Utomo & Ahsanah (2020) also mention that mastering grammar assists the learners in constructing better language structure and create meaningful messages.

There are several studies that are relevant to this study. First, there is research from Tahe (2020) which focuses on the types of learning difficulties in speaking English faced by four foreign students from Thailand who are studying at the Islamic University of Lamongan. Second, there is

research from Marudin et al., (2018) which focuses on the factors behind the low English-speaking skills of five foreign students from Thailand who are studying at Muhammadiyah University in Surabaya.

The third research is a research conducted by Khilqi & Dwinalida (2022). This research discusses the learning problems faced by a foreign student from Thailand at UIN Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri. The research also discusses programs that have been carried out by universities to help foreign students. Furthermore, there is research from Samalee (2017) which discusses the problems of learning English experienced by nine Thai students at IAIN Salatiga. The fifth study was conducted by Luftiana et al., (2020). This research focuses on language and cultural barriers experienced by foreign students from Thailand studying at Nahdlatul Ulama University of Purwokerto and their impact on academic achievement. The sixth study was carried out by (Rahayuningmas et al., 2024) who also explored the types of learning difficulties experienced by Thai students at Nahdlatul Ulama University, Purwokerto.

This study itself has several differences from the six studies described above. First, in terms of participants, this study is different from previous studies except for the fifth and sixth studies. Second, the focus of research conducted is broader, namely exploring the factors that cause learning difficulties. Third, this research is a continuation of the sixth research. In this research, the team explored in more depth the causal factors of Thai students' problems in learning language elements. From this background, the research team assumes that research on "Exploring the Factors Leading to Thai Students' Problems in Learning English Elements " still needs to be done and can contribute to the world of teaching English as a language foreign language in Indonesia (EFL Context).

## METHOD

In this study, the approach employed was a qualitative approach with a case study type. Fraenkel et al., (2012) states that case studies are part of a qualitative method that examine significant individuals, groups or examples to explore specific explanations or provide useful generalizations. Crowe et al., (2011) state that case studies are used when in-depth explanations of an issue, phenomenon or event in a real-life context. Suwartono (2014) explains that in a case study the things examined in a study can be individuals, institutions, or groups. Individual case studies have more revealing power than those involving groups. Ary et al., (2010) also add that case studies usually focus on one unit to produce a rich and thorough in-depth picture.

The participants in this study were seven foreign students from Thailand who studied at the English Language

Education Study Program, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Purwokerto. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview guideline adapted from Ratnasari (2019). The interview guideline consisted of 12 W-Q questions. According to Suwartono (2014), interviews are a way of gathering information or data through verbal/oral interactions. Interviewing allows us to infiltrate into the "nature" of other people's minds, precisely things related to feelings, thoughts, experiences, opinions, and others that cannot be observed. Ary et al., (2010) point out that interviews are used to gather data about opinions, beliefs and feelings about situations in their own words. Winarni (2018) states that interviews are a data collection method requiring direct communication between investigators and subjects or respondents. In short, the interviews are carried out by direct oral communication between the interviewer and the interviewee and the interview method is employed to reveal what the source is thinking.

After the interviews were conducted, the researcher made a transcript of the interview results and analysed the data based on the stages of qualitative research data analysis from Ary et al., (2010). Following are some of the stages in question:

### 1. Familiarizing and Organizing

In this phase, the researchers read and re-read notes and transcripts, view and review recordings and listen to recordings over and over again. In essence, researchers must explore the research data obtained. After this step, the researcher must organize the data obtained. This can be started by making a complete list of data, then organizing the files in various possible ways.

### 2. Coding and Reducing

This stage is the core stage in the qualitative research process. This process begins by identifying the categories and themes in the research data obtained. What researchers can do to be able to carry out the coding process is to read and re-read the existing data by paying attention to meaningful units such as words, phrases, sentences, the way the subject thinks, patterns of behaviour, and events that appear regularly and are important. In addition to the coding process, researchers also need to reduce data that is less relevant to the topic being analysed.

### 3. Interpreting and Representing

The next stage is to interpret the data that has been analysed. Interpretation is presenting meaning, telling, providing explanations, and developing possible explanations. Furthermore, the researcher must also present the results of the analysis. The researchers can use pictures, charts, graphs, etc.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analysing the data gathered, the researchers found out several different factors leading to Thai students' difficulty in learning English elements. Here are the detailed findings.

### 1. Pronunciation

#### a. Anxiety

One of the factors that causes students' learning difficulties in pronunciation is restlessness or worry. Two students said they were afraid of making mistakes and afraid of being bullied by their friends. S5 also felt shy when she had to pronounce. These factors can be classified into anxiety. The following is what students said during the interview:

"Kayaknya lidah ibu karena mau niru aksen Amerika itu harus gimana ya, takutnya bully" (S1)

"Maybe it's due to my mother tongue. Because I want to imitate American accent. What should I do, I'm afraid of bullying?" (S1)

"Malu pak, kadang takut salah." (S5)

"I'm shy Pak. Sometimes I'm afraid of making mistake" (S5)

#### b. Accent Confusion

The next factor that causes difficulties in learning pronunciation in English is confusion about accents in English. Two students were confused about which accent to use and sometimes combined several accents in one speech.

"...ngga tau aksennya yang mana seperti ada British sma American English gitu bu jadi kadang-kadang ngga tau logatnya yang mana..." (S2)

"...I don't know which accent it is, like there is British or American English, ma'am, so sometimes I don't know which accent it is..." (S2)

"I'm just still bingung sama aksen lagi. Kan saya belajar banyak aksen nih bu british, American, Australian jadi pas saya mau ngomong pronunciation ini dalam satu sentence tapi kata-kata ini british, terus American terus Australian jadi saya mau gimana?..." (S4)

"I'm just still confused about accents again. I'm learning a lot of accents, ma'am, British, American, Australian, so when I want to say this pronunciation in one sentence, these words are British, then American and then Australian, so what do I want to do?" (S4)

#### c. Classroom Environment

The next factor that is felt to be the cause of difficulties in learning pronunciation is the lack of credits during the lecture process. During their studies they only got *Pronunciation Practice Subject* which weighed 2 credits. The student felt this was lacking. The following is what was revealed during the interview.

“...kita kuliahnya juga ngga terlalu banyak gitu ya tentang pronunciationnya gitu...” (S3)

‘...We didn’t study a lot about pronunciation...’(S3)

#### d. L1 interference

The fourth factor that causes difficulties in learning pronunciation is the influence of the students' first language. They admitted that they had difficulty because it was difficult for the Thai tongue to adapt to English pronunciation. The following is what students said:

“Kayaknya lidah ibu karena mau niru aksen amerika itu hrus gimana ya, takutnya bully.” (S1)

‘I think it’s due to my mother tongue. I want to imitate how American accent is. I’m afraid of bullying’ (S1)

“Kalo menurut saya pronunciation masih ya saya suka orang pronunciationnya jelas tapi saya pengen sama seperti mereka itu its hard menurut saya itu sulit karena lidah orang Thailand itu susah bu apalagi ....”(S4)

‘In my opinion, pronunciation is still good, I like people whose pronunciation is clear, but I want to be the same as them, it's hard, in my opinion it's difficult because the Thai’s tongue is difficult, ma'am....’ (S4)

## 2. Vocabulary

### a. Lack of Motivation

The questionable factor that causes difficulties in mastering English vocabulary is the students' lack of motivation to learn. Students felt lazy to study, felt that no one encourages them to study, and the causal factor is really the student themselves. There were three students who felt this way. The following are student expressions during the interview:

“Itu pertama saya sering lupa, yang kedua itu kadang-kadang malas hafalnya.” (S5)

‘Firstly, I often forget, secondly, sometimes I’m too lazy to memorize it.’ (S5)

“It's easy But I’m lazy. For me, vocabulary If kita hafal ya sudah mungkin sifat malas itu dah banyak. Pas saya SMA itu hafal terus oleh karena

kita dalam keadaan harus hafal mau tukar sama nilai ya hafal...” (S4)

“It's easy, but I’m lazy. For me, vocabulary If we memorize it, maybe we already have a lot of laziness. When I was in high school, I kept memorizing it because we were in a situation where we had to memorize it and exchange it for grades, so we memorized it....’ (S4)

“Kalau bagi saya, cara Inggris vocabulary itu nggak terlalu sulit bagi siapapun bu, tapi yang sulit itu sendiri. (S3)”

‘For me, the English vocabulary system was not too difficult for anyone, ma'am, but the difficult this is ourselves.’ (S3)

### b. Learners’ peer group

The second factor that causes difficulties for foreign students in mastering vocabulary is friends or groups to study with. Student No. 4 stated that currently there are no friends who motivate or encourage her to memorize vocabulary.

“...Pas saya SMA itu hafal terus oleh karena kita dalam keadaan harus hafal mau tukar sama nilai ya hafal, pas ekarang ngga ada orang yang ya kamu harus hafal Nida ngga ada kaya gitu... ..” (S4)

‘...When I was in high school, I kept memorizing it because we were in a situation where we had to memorize it and exchange it for grades, so we memorized it. Nowadays, there's no one who ask me to do it like “Nida you have to memorize it!”. There is no something like that...’ (S4)

### c. Language Learner Ability

The next factor that causes difficulties in learning vocabulary in English is the ability of the learners. Three students admitted that they often did not know or forgot vocabulary in English. This reflects that the causal factor is the learner's own memory ability. The following is a snippet of what was discussed during the interview:

“...kalau mau pakai itu saya ngga tau, jadi kosakata ngga ada di kepala saya...”(S2)

‘...if I want to use it, I don't know, so the vocabulary doesn't exist in my head...’(S2)

“Untuk vocabulary itu saya mudah lupa, bagi saya vocabulary saya itu sedikit (S7)”

‘For the vocabulary, I forget easily, for me my vocabulary is limited’ (S7)

‘‘Itu pertama saya sering lupa, yang kedua itu kadang-kadang malas hafalnya. (S5)’’

‘Firstly, I often forget, secondly, sometimes I'm too lazy to memorize it.’ (S5)

#### d. Unfamiliar Vocabulary

The final cause felt by students is not knowing certain vocabulary, especially vocabulary for formal situations. Here's what two students said in the interviews.

‘...dalam buku menurut formal gitu jadi kosakata yang susah tapi kalau yang biasa-biasa tidak terlalu.’ (S1)

‘... in the book, for formal contexts, it's difficult vocabulary, but for ordinary ones it's not that difficult.’ (S1)

‘Vocabnya kalau yang biasa tu bisa, kalau yang formal sulit bagi saya.’ (S6)

‘The normal vocabulary is fine, but the formal vocabulary is difficult for me.’ (S6)

### 3. Grammar

#### a. Many English grammar formulas

The first factor that causes difficulties in learning grammar for Thai students is many formulas in English grammar. They have difficulty remembering and understanding how to use them. The following is what students said in the interview:

‘...karena saya susah dihafal gitu bu, jadi grammarnya banyak mau nulisnya ini harus past tense, mau nulisnya future harus future jdi kurang hafal..(S1)’

‘...because I have a hard time memorizing that, ma'am. So, there are many grammar rules. How should I write it, past tense or future. I don't really know...’(S1)

‘‘Grammar itu sangat banyak strukturnya sulit.’’ (S5)

‘Grammar has a lot of structures. It's hard’ (S5)

#### b. Negative attitude toward grammar

The next factor that causes difficulty in mastering English grammar is a negative attitude towards grammar itself. Two students admitted that they didn't like grammar. The following is what the students said:

‘Harus ada pattern, harus hafal kalo kata-kata ini harus pake ini, ini past simple tense ya begitu bu. Itu menurut saya sulit banget untuk menghafal kan saya

ngga suka Math nih terus Bahasa Inggris juga harus hafal kaya Math kaya Kimia.’’ (S4)

‘There has to be a pattern, you have to memorize these words, you have to use this, this is the past simple tense. Something like that ma'am. In my opinion, it's really difficult to memorize, I don't like Math, and English also has to be memorized, like Math and chemistry.’ (S4)

‘‘Saya tidak terlalu suka dengan grammar (S6)’’

‘I don't really like grammar’ (S6)

#### c. Lack of motivation

The final cause of difficulty in mastering English grammar is students' lack of motivation to learn. They admit that they are lazy about learning grammar and often do not use grammar themselves. The following is what students said during the interview:

‘Sendiri yang buat kenapa ngga bisa dihafal, itu buat sendiri saja yang malas, terkadang malas, terkadang jadi kalau mau hafal itu malas...(S3)’

‘Why can't you memorize it yourself? It's yourself who is lazy, sometimes you're lazy, sometimes if I want to memorize it I'm lazy...(S3)’

‘‘Ngga sering dipakai (S6)’’

‘‘rarely used (S6)’’

#### d. Language Lerner Ability

The last factor led to the learning problem in grammar was the student's ability to learn. One of the students admitted that she didn't know how to use the grammar rules. Therefore, grammar was hard for her. Here is what she said during the interview.

‘...karena ngga ngerti cara pakainya gimana gitu. Jadi mau susunnya rasanya sulit bu grammarnya. (S2)’

‘...because I don't know how to use it. So, if I want arrange, the grammar is hard ma'am...’(S2)

The various factors found as causes of difficulties for Thai students learning linguistic components in English show that those who study foreign languages in foreign countries tend to have more complex factors. Of the three subskills in English, internal factors have more influence on the problems experienced by Thai students, such as anxiety, lack of motivation, language learner ability, and negative attitude. Musa et al., (2012) mentioned that considering English as a challenging subject is one of the things causing learners' difficulties. Learning challenges can also result from a lack of enthusiasm to study or a bad attitude towards the target language (Strevens in Anwari, 2019). Moreover, Setiawan (2017), in internal factor, there

psychological factors including (1) intelligence (ability to face, adapt to new situations effectively, use abstract concepts effectively and know relationships and learn them quickly), (2) attention as heightened mental activity (an object), (3) interest as a person's tendency to keep paying attention and remembering several activities, these activities are liked and paid attention to continuously, (4) talent (aptitude) is the ability to learn, and abilities will be realized into real skills after learning. (5) Motivation is related to goals, where goals are formed because of encouragement. (6) maturity is a level of a person's development where parts of his body are ready to carry out new skills. (7) Readiness is the willingness to react. The findings of this study showed that, Thai students' learning problems in mastering English language sub-skills were influenced by themselves. Anwari (2019) also mentions eleven factors leading to English language learners' problems. Some of them belong to internal factor such as lack of self-confidence for learning the English language, lack of motivation for learning or the negative attitude towards the target language, lack of interests with the English language, students have a limitation of vocabulary, and English is regarded as a difficult subject to learn.

Meanwhile, the external factor occurred in this study were classroom environment, learners' peer group, and many English grammar formulas. Souriyavongsa et al., (2013) explained that the majority of students said that the curriculum isn't suited to help them become more proficient in English. Taweepadung et al., (2018) state that there are four different factors affected students' ability namely, linguistics, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistics, and classroom and educational factors. Furthermore, Setiawan (2017) mentions that there are three external factor called family, school, and society. From school point of view, there several different factors including: (1) teaching methods, (2) curriculum (a number of activities given to students), (3) the relationship between teachers and students, (4) the relationship between students and teachers, (5) school discipline, (6) teaching tools, (7) school hours, (8) learning standards above standards, (9) condition of buildings, (10) learning methods, (11) homework.

## CONCLUSION

The outcomes showed a number of crucial conclusions. First of all, anxiety, accent misunderstanding, the classroom setting, and L1 interference were the reasons why learning English pronunciation was challenging. Second, learners' peer group, language learning ability, unfamiliar vocabulary, and lack of enthusiasm were the main reasons why they had trouble mastering vocabulary. Thirdly, a lack of desire, a bad attitude towards grammar, and the abundance of English grammar formulas were the elements making grammar difficult to learn. The future

study may concentrate on the challenges associated with acquiring English language skills or investigate more suitable teaching methods for international students studying English in Indonesia.

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