

## **The effects of study-abroad experience to language learning beliefs: A study of Indonesian postgraduate students**

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**Abstract.** Study abroad and the effects of it have been a major research topic of language learning beliefs. A wide range of studies has examined the impacts of study abroad on an individual's language learning beliefs. However, few studies have investigated Indonesian students' language learning beliefs after studying abroad. This study explores the effects of overseas-study experience to Indonesian postgraduate students' language learning beliefs at a university in Melbourne, Australia. This current research adopts a qualitative method, specifically semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth, rich, and high-quality data. The semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 4 participants (2 males and 2 females). The results of this study demonstrate the impacts of study abroad on students' language learning beliefs. The participants evidently believed that overseas study affected not only their linguistic skills but also their attitude towards English. They gained experience which could only be drawn from their sojourn period. Thus, this research concludes that the relationship of study-abroad experience and linguistic competencies is sometimes not entirely straightforward. Rather, other aspects may be benefited from overseas study.

### **1. Introduction**

Study abroad is associated with the act of travelling to a foreign nation for the purpose of study [1] [2]. Several researchers have suggested the positive impacts of study abroad such as Chien [3] and Keppie, Linberg and Thomason [4] who discovered the improvements of their participants' oral proficiency during overseas study. However, the relationship between overseas study and linguistic development may not always be entirely straightforward. For instance, Schmidt and Pardo [5] and Serrano, Llanes and Tragant [6] did not find any significant progress in oral production of their respondents during overseas study. Thus, overseas study may not always guarantee the individuals linguistic improvement. Interestingly, recent empirical studies indicated that the experience of study abroad apparently affects not only the learners' specific linguistic aspects but also their attitude to the target language, the culture, and the world in general [7]. The most significant effect of study abroad primarily lies in the abilities related to sociolinguistic, discourse, and pragmatic [8]. In other words, overseas study may also affect individual's language learning beliefs. Language learning beliefs are described as students' perception or opinion on issues and controversies about language learning, e.g. second/ foreign language learning [9] [10]. To put it differently, language learning beliefs are what the students' hold to be true about the target language and the process of learning the language. Thus, language learning beliefs are defined as one of the most essential elements of language learning development because it can largely affect the

students' attitude to the target language [11]. While some researchers perceived beliefs are static metacognitive knowledge [12] [13] others argued that they are multifaceted, dynamic, and context-sensitive [14] [15].

The research of study abroad and language learning beliefs has gained attention in the past decade. As an example, Kaypak and Ortactepe [16] discovered changes in their Turkish participants' language learning beliefs after they studied in Canada and the USA due to their social interactions. Prior to study abroad, they believed accuracy was the most crucial skill to survive. However, they shifted their beliefs from accuracy to intelligibility to achieve successful English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) communication during study abroad. Corresponding to Kaypak and Ortactepe, Baker [17] underlined that his respondents apparently needed the ability to negotiate and mediate meaning, and be creative in English interpretation rather than focusing too much on grammar. Furthermore, Kim and Yang [18] explored two Korean L2 learners in the USA and Philippines, and they evidently uncovered the reasons why the participants altered their beliefs on language learning after studying abroad. Social interaction with locals was considered as one of the reasons why they changed their beliefs. Another example is a study by Amuzie and Winke [19] who highlighted the relationship between learners' beliefs and their external factors, such as learners' behaviors and the academic context. They found in their study that the 70 participants, who came from various background with different L1, changed their language learning beliefs after studying abroad in the USA. They changed their perception of learner autonomy and the role of teacher after study abroad. More changes occurred in the students who spent more time in the USA.

These studies indicated that study abroad and learners' beliefs are mutually correlated not only in linguistic competencies terms, but also beyond those skills. The participants in their studies believed that the abilities to develop fluency and basic communicative competence, global awareness, and intercultural competence were the key points to survive in the country where they studied abroad instead of attempting nativelike. It is worth noting that language learning beliefs are gradually changing, dynamic, socially constructed, and context-dependent. However, despite such growing interest, there are a few studies have attempted to specifically examine the effects of study abroad for Indonesian postgraduate students, particularly those who study in Melbourne, Australia. As a matter of fact, the numbers of Indonesian students in Australia have reached more than 20,000 students since more Indonesian acknowledge Australia as their closest neighbour, with the world-class universities [20]. These numbers will keep growing as the opportunity to study in Australia is getting bigger and bigger. With the large population of Indonesian in Victoria, Australia, the study of language learning beliefs during study abroad among Indonesian students is worth investigating to significantly contribute to the discipline of English language learning.

The current study then, in its focus on Indonesian postgraduate students who study abroad at an Australian university in Melbourne, aims to explore the effects of study-abroad experience to language learning beliefs. This research conducted semi-structured interviews with 4 participants (2 first-year students and 2 second-year students) to answer the following research question: what are the effects of study-abroad experience to Indonesian postgraduate students' language learning beliefs? The answers to this research question are expected to offer an understanding of how study-abroad experience may construct the language learners' beliefs towards English. Overall, the outcomes of this study will be beneficial not only for teachers but also for students in terms of pedagogical implications in Indonesia. To be more specific, this study can be a useful reference for English institutions in Indonesia to develop a suitable curriculum and materials for students who plan to study abroad, particularly in Australia.

## 2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative method as it provides high-quality and rich data and relies on natural setting. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this research. According to Talmy [21], an interview is defined as a tool for collecting information, specifically revealing truths, attitudes, beliefs, and mental states of respondents. Subsequently, the data might be more authentic and reliable. The four

participants for this study were Indonesian postgraduate students who study abroad at an Australian university in Melbourne (see Table 1). This research implemented criterion sampling to recruit the participants, which means the participants were selected based on the specific criteria [22]. Postgraduate students were purposely selected since they were expected to have stronger critical thinking than undergraduate students. Postgraduate students commonly require a higher level of understanding, greater independence, and more specialised knowledge than undergraduate students. Thus, postgraduate students were expected to be more broad-minded and sensitive to English language learning during overseas study.

**Table 1.** The participants of the current study

Pseudonym	Duration in Australia	Academic year/ Major
Chandra (M)	6 months	First-year student/ Master of Digital Learning
Ghea (F)	6 months	First-year student/ Master of Applied Linguistics
Hasbi (M)	18 months	Second-year student/ Master of Environment and Sustainability
Elen (F)	18 months	Second-year student/ Master of Communication

The interviews were one-on-one, and lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. It is worth noting that the interviews were all conducted in Indonesian to gain more meaningful and natural data since Indonesian is the participants' first language. The interview questions of this current research were adapted from the studies which conducted the similar topic with this research, e.g. Kaypak and Ortaçtepe [16], and Kim and Yang [18]. One of the questions of the interview was a question modified from Kim and Yang's study [18] (e.g. 'In your opinion, what is considered as high level of English proficiency?').

The overall data are all elicited from the interview questions to the FYS and SYS and they are subsequently divided into several subcategories based on the key findings. The key findings are then examined and discussed with reference to the contextual approach by Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) [23]. Vygotsky describes that social interactions play a pivotal role in the development of cognition. He also mentioned unity of behavior and consciousness, which mean the integration of mind and social interaction is a major characteristic of human development. Thus, the construction of knowledge in one's mental life relies on a socio-culturally mediated process instead of biological maturations per se. Furthermore, Vygotsky elaborated the idea of "zone of proximal development" (ZPD); humans are cognitively prepared, but demand help and social interaction to fully develop. In essence, teachers, more experienced peers, acquaintance may be essential in driving one's cognitive development.

### 3. Results and Discussions

According to the thematic analysis, the effect of study-abroad experience to Indonesian postgraduate students' language learning beliefs could be divided as two themes: a) reconstructing the definition of English proficiency, and b) shifting paradigm of English

#### 3.1. Reconstructing the definition of English proficiency

All of the participants stated that study-abroad experience has significantly changed the way they think about the high level of English proficiency.

*(1) Menurut saya sih high level of English proficiency itu berkaitan dengan grammar, juga harus menguasai semua skills ya, seperti Reading, Listening, Speaking, Writing. Tapi, semenjak tinggal disini, mutual understanding jauh lebih penting untuk kelancaran komunikasi.*



I think that high level of English proficiency relates to grammar and mastering all skills, such as Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing skills. However, ever since I came here (Australia), mutual understanding is much more important (than mastering 4 skills and grammar) to have successful communication.

(Ghea/F/FYS/05:51)

The excerpt above confirmed Vygotsky's SCT, in which social interaction may modify one's perspective towards language learning. Ghea has significantly reconstructed her beliefs in English proficiency level after studying abroad. She used to hold the opinion that to have high proficiency of English, one should master reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills as her teacher in Indonesia said. Yet, she evidently acknowledged that intelligibility is more crucial to attain successful cross-cultural communication than mastering all skills after joining Master Program in Melbourne, Australia. When asked why she held such opinion, she elaborated her experience communicating with Australian and found that her incorrect grammar did not subsequently intimidate her. Rather, mutual understanding was necessarily required during interaction. This excerpt endorses Kaypak and Ortactepe [16] who found a similar change which was occurred to their participants. Furthermore, Chandra, Hasbi, and Elen also asserted:

(2) *Dulu sempet mikir orang yang pinter Bahasa Inggris itu adalah orang yang grammarnya perfect, pronunciationnya kaya orang bule. Tapi ternyata setelah sampai sini, yang paling penting itu mengerti budaya mereka (orang Australia), misalkan bagaimana cara minta tolong, cara memuji, cara melakukan basa-basi.*

I used to think that people with high English level was the one who uses perfect grammar, and has good pronunciation like 'bule' (Caucasian). But, it turns out that when I arrived here (in Australia), the most important thing is understanding their (Australian) culture, such as know how to ask for help, how to give a compliment, and how to do a small talk.

(Chandra/M/FYS/05:00)

(3) *Faktanya, di realita sekarang, kemampuan bahasa Inggris yang bagus itu adalah yang bisa negotiate meaning, yang bisa me manage misunderstanding, yang bisa paham cultural terms. Dulu waktu belajar Bahasa Inggris di Indonesia, saya mikir "oh, kamu jago Bahasa Inggris kalau ngomongnya sudah seperti native speaker." Tapi kalau berhubungan dengan akademik ya memang harus tetap focus pada grammarnya, terutama kalau menulis atau membaca.*

In fact, now in reality, English proficiency is related to the one who could negotiate meaning, manage misunderstanding, and understand cultural terms. When I learned English in Indonesia, I used to think that "oh, you're English proficient if you can speak like a native speaker." However, in academic terms, you still have to focus on grammar, especially in writing or reading.

(Hasbi/M/SYS/04:42)

(4) *Saya sering think too much tentang grammar saya, terutama kalau sedang berbicara dengan teman, takut membuat kesalahan. Tapi disini tidak perlu ya. Mereka paham kok kita bicara apa.*

I think too much about my grammar, especially when I talk (to a friend), I'm afraid of making (grammatical) mistakes. But, in here (Australia), you don't need it (to be afraid of making grammatical mistakes). They (Australians) understand what you're saying.

(Elen/F/SYS/08:49)

Based on those excerpts above, Hasbi critically described that English proficiency is now associated with the abilities beyond linguistic competencies. He pointed out that the capability to negotiate meaning, overcome misunderstanding, and apprehend cultural terms played pivotal role in multicultural communication. Yet, in academic terms, he still believed that grammatical accuracy was the key element to gain high quality output in English.

Similar to Hasbi, Elen also agreed that understanding culture is crucial rather than thinking too much about grammar. She used to be afraid making grammatical mistakes due to her past experience at school. She stated that her English teacher in Indonesia once said a good English always related to a good grammar. Nevertheless, she shifted her beliefs due to a specific reason: her inner circle in Melbourne. She mentioned that she actively engaged in an Australian-Indonesian association in Melbourne, thus enabled her to interact with locals.

To sum up, the above-mentioned discussions prove that socio-cultural environment played significant role in shifting one's perceptions towards English. All participants in this study reconstruct their beliefs on English language learning as they study abroad. Prior to overseas study, they previously assumed that accuracy and correct grammar were the best solution to master English. Nonetheless, what happens in Australia seemed to depict mismatch between what they have acquired from school versus what they have to overcome in a real-life situation. This study corroborates Kaypak and Ortactepe [16] and Kim and Cha [18] who also discovered changes in their informants' language learning beliefs in their study due to the social context.

### 3.2. Shifting paradigm of English

The results of the interviews suggested that most of the respondents have shifted their paradigm of English as a result of study abroad. They believed that English nowadays has received a global status in the world and defining the term 'native' speaker is quite problematic every now and then.

(5) *Karena ada banyak variasi Bahasa Inggris, ya semua orang bisa jadi native speaker dari variasinya sendiri. Misalnya orang Singapura yang ngomong Singlish itu adalah native speaker dari Singlish.*

Since there are many varieties of English, everybody could be a native speaker of his or her own variety. For example, Singaporean who speaks Singlish is the native speaker of Singlish.

(Ghea/F/SYS/06:06)

Ghea acknowledged the varieties of English nowadays since she stated that she made friends with people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds, such as Australia, India, Colombia, Saudi Arabia, China, and Singapore. It is worth noting that she mentioned Singaporean English as she noticed that each person from different nation might bring their own 'English'. Thus, she positively displayed her tolerance to all types of English.

Corresponding to Ghea, Hasbi also depicts his critical thinking about the term 'native' English speaker:

(6) *Native English speaker itu menurutku ya tetap orang yang lahir dan besar UK ya, karena Bahasa Inggris kan berasal dari sana. Kemudian menyebar di USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. Tapi setelah sekolah disini, menurutku term native itu masih sangat debatable, karena Bahasa Inggris juga punya local varieties, contohnya Bahasa Inggris di Amerika kan ada Northern dan Southern part nya yang berbeda, UK punya Cockney, Posh. Australia juga punya aksan Broad, Cultivated, and General. Singlish juga kan variasi Bahasa Inggris. Jadi ya, term native itu kayaknya harus di bedah lagi lebih dalam, native yang seperti apa yang kita maksud.*

Native English speakers are those who were born and raised in UK as English is derived from UK, then it spread through the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. But, ever since I studied here

(in Australia) I think the term 'native' is still debatable because English also has local varieties. For instance, English in the USA also has varieties, Northern and Southern parts may have their own varieties. The UK has Cockney, Posh. Australian English has Broad, Cultivated, and General accent. Singlish is also a variety of English. So, I think the term 'native' should be investigated more deeply, we need to know what kind of native we refer to.

(Hasbi/M/SYS/07:06)

This excerpt clearly demonstrates Hasbi's critical analysis of the term 'native' speaker of English due to his familiarity with a multicultural environment. It is worth noting that Hasbi used to join a student-exchange program in Canada for six months. Also, he explains that he has travelled to Brunei Darussalam, China, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, USA, Vietnam, and Philippines. Moreover, Hasbi mentioned he likes making friends with people from different nations to learn their culture. Thus, Hasbi is an excellent example to illustrate this point as he is aware of the varieties of English around the world, and he confirms that the specific criteria for 'native' speaker is undoubtedly necessary to measure the 'nativeness'. He believes that the term 'native' English speakers could not be broadly applied to English around the world.

In summation, the finding in this study supports Vygotsky's SCT, in which the development and changes in the students' language learning beliefs are relied on the notion of social network, mediation, and unity of behaviour and consciousness. This study is also in line with Kim and Yang [18], where the participants confirmed changes in their English language learning beliefs mostly due to their social network. The more they interact with people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds, the more they renew their perceptions of English. Thus, this research evidently demonstrates the bi-directional relationship between study-abroad experience and learners' beliefs.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The findings of the present study conclude that potential factors contributing to the students' changing beliefs are unequivocally related to the students' external factors. In this study, social network and real interaction with diverse people might reform the participants' beliefs and views towards English language learning as a whole. The frequent multicultural interaction with teachers, peers, and other contextual contingencies appears to have a major impact on students' beliefs about their capability to speak English without feeling unduly nervous. This current research, corroborating the findings from the previous studies, affirms that Indonesian postgraduate students' language learning beliefs are fluid, dynamic, and context-responsive due to the complexity of human mind. Language learning beliefs are not homogenous and static, rather, they are constantly constructed, and dependent from time to time.

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