

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents an introduction to the research that provides an overview of the topic and the direction of the study. It begins with the research background, which explains the rationale and importance of the study, followed by definitions of key terms, the research question, the research objectives, and the significance of the study. These sections serve as the foundation for understanding the focus of the research and provide an overview of the topics that will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

A. Background of Study

In Indonesia, learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is typically viewed as a formal academic subject taught through classroom instruction, assessment-based activities, and structured curricula. In many EFL classrooms, learning success is frequently measured using test scores, grades, or observable language performance (Brown & Lee, 2025). Although these assessments are crucial, but they frequently place more emphasis on learning results than the actual learning process (Richards, 2015). As a result, learners' individual experiences, reflections, motivations, and challenges during their language learning journeys are frequently overlooked.

Learning a foreign language is an emotional and reflective process, as well as a cognitive one. During the language learning process, EFL (English as a Foreign

Language) students experience various stages, including periods of progress, challenges, anxiety, motivation, and personal development. Over time, these experiences impact how learners view English, interpret what they have learned, and overcome difficulties (Dörnyei, 2014). To understand EFL learning more comprehensively and in a learner-centered way, it is essential to study the real experiences of learners.

Several previous studies have attempted to explore students' learning experiences in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) using visual and participatory approaches such as photovoice. For example, Sari & Sultan (2022) explored students' emotional experiences in learning to write through photographs, revealing how visual images helped students to express feelings that were difficult to express verbally. In a similar context, Militansina (2023) examined the use of photovoice in EFL essay writing and found that photos encouraged students to reflect on their writing experiences. Other studies also use photos to analyze students' experiences in specific learning situations, such as essay writing and thesis proposal writing, with a strong emphasis on the emotional aspects of learning (Kadariyah & Marhamah, 2025).

These studies demonstrate the value of photos and photovoice in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, but there are several limitations. First, rather than looking at the overall language learning journey of students through various phases, many previous studies, such as those conducted by Sari & Sultan (2022) and Militansina (2023) tend to focus on specific language skills or isolated learning

situations, such as writing or speaking. Second, current research often focuses on students' emotional experiences or educational outcomes, with little attention to how students create their own interpretations of English language learning and consider their progress, challenges, and development over time. Third, the challenges faced by students are often mentioned implicitly, but there is still a lack of research that explicitly explores the challenges faced by students and the efforts they make to overcome and address these challenges, especially as represented through photographs and supported by the students' own narratives.

In the other study by Sa'adah and Munir (2023), it was proven that photovoice can help students express their emotions, ideas, and perceptions through photograph to support their reflective and narrative writing process. However, most studies using Photovoice have focused on the implementation of the technique in basic writing learning and have not touched on how the creative process of photograph itself can shape students' language learning journey in depth, especially narratively.

Meanwhile in the study by Ma'rifah (2020) showed that student stories can reveal important aspects in designing meaningful learning experiences, but the study has not used visual representations as the main tool to explore these stories. On the other hand, visualizations such as photograph are known to be effective in enhancing students' creativity and imagination in writing as in the study by Listyani (2019) the result suggested that pictures, especially comic strips were very beneficial in helping students to write narratives. They helped students generate

ideas, explore into more creativity, and also develop their imagination and inspiration in writing, but most of research investigation are still limited to its implementation in the context of teaching simple narratives.

In a study conducted by Awan (2023) which examined the experiences of English students in expressing their challenges and how to deal with these challenges. The results obtained are various challenges faced by English students, difficulties in understanding and expressing themselves well in English so that it causes frustration because of self-doubt, cultural differences that cause feelings of alienation and social isolation. The solution to these challenges is a supportive learning environment and effective teaching strategies.

These limitations highlighted a clear research gap. There is still a lack of research that comprehensively examines EFL learners' language learning journeys, focusing on learners' experiences, meaning-making processes, challenges, and coping efforts across different stages of learning. Addressing this gap requires understanding EFL learning not only as a skill acquisition process, but also as a continuous and reflective journey shaped by learners'-lived experiences.

Photographs provide a meaningful way to explore such experiences. Through Photographs, learners can capture moments, symbols, and situations that reflect their language learning experiences. When combined with narrative reflection, photographs serve as tools for meaning-making and self-expression rather than just visual documentation. This approach is consistent with photovoice principles,

which emphasize participant voice, reflection, and the representation of lived experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The reflective nature of this study is consistent with Islamic values that highlight self-awareness and reflection. This concept is stated in Surah Al-Hasyr, verse 18:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَلْتَنْظُرْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ

بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

This verse encourages believers to reflect their actions and plan for the future. In this study, learners use photographs as a reflective tool to analyze their current and previous language learning experiences, identify their efforts and challenges, and develop self-awareness. This reflective process helps students not only improve their English skills, but also grow personally and academically.

This study was carried out at UIN Antasari Banjarmasin, specifically in the English Education Department, where English is taught as a foreign language in an academic and Islamic educational setting. In this context, students learn English through formal instruction while simultaneously navigating their personal goals, challenges and expectations for their future careers as English teachers. analyzing students' experiences in this setting offers contextualized and situated insights into college EFL learning at the tertiary level.

Rather than focusing on a specific period or instructional stage, this study examines learners' experiences at various stages of their language learning journey, as shown in photographs and narratives. The study explores into learners' experiences learning English, their perceived progress in using English, the challenges they face at each stage of their learning journey, and the efforts they make to cope with and overcome those challenges. This approach views language learning as a continuous, evolving, and reflective process shaped by learners' experiences and meaning-making.

More specifically, in this research focuses on how photographs can represent students' English learning journeys in a deeply personal and narrative way. In this context, photograph is more than just a tool to help with writing, it is a reflecting tool that helps students document their experiences, difficulties, and important moments as they learn English.

As a result, the writer had an interest in studying this research, "Narrative in Focus: How EFL Learners Use Photographs to Represent Their Language Learning Journeys," which aims to investigate how EFL learners represent their language learning experiences through photographs, with a focus on meaning, challenges, and coping efforts throughout their language learning journey. By filling research gaps, this study advances our understanding of EFL learning as a reflective, learner-centered, and meaningful process.

The reason for capturing students' English learning journeys through photograph is that learning a language is not just about completing assignments or

mastering grammar rules. Additionally, it involves real, lived experiences of students feeling nervous when speaking, happy of their writing accomplishments, or irritated but determined to overcome difficulties. These personal and emotional experiences are essential to understanding language learning but are often difficult to fully express in words.

B. Definition of Key Terms

Some of key terms of the research title are defined below, it is conducted to avoid the misunderstanding.

1. EFL learners refer to learners who study English as a foreign language or students who study English as a second language in their country. In this study, EFL learners refer to learners who study English as a foreign language, namely eighth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at UIN Antasari.
2. In this study, the term “photograph” referred to images selected by the participants that depicted their English language learning journey and how it improved their English skills. These photos are meant to illustrate how their learning experiences evolved over time, including whether the journey led to positive progress. In short, the photos used in this study capture moments of learning, growth, and meaningful experiences related to English language learning.
3. Language Learning Journey is the main concept that represents the language

learning experience of the participating students. In this study it means the process and experiences that learners go through while learning English over time. It depicts each student's unique language development journey. Every learner may begin studying English at a different time and apply a variety of learning techniques, such as speaking, reading, watching movies, or listening to music. Learners might also have a variety of difficulties during this process, such as grammar mistakes, a very limited vocabulary, or a lack of confidence when speaking. So, the term "language learning journey" in this study refers to the learners' experiences with learning English, including how they learn the language, the difficulties they face, and the efforts they make to get better at it.

C. Research Questions

The main research questions discussed in this study were:

1. How do the photographs represent EFL learners' experiences in improving their English skills throughout their language learning journey?
2. What challenges do EFL learners face throughout their language learning journey?

D. Objectives of Study

Base on the research questions, the purpose of the research study is to investigate:

1. To explore how photographs represent EFL learners' experiences in improving their English skills throughout their language learning journey.
2. To identify the challenges EFL learners face throughout their language learning journey.

E. Significance of Study

1. Theoretically

This study contributes to the understanding of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning by demonstrating that improvements in English language proficiency do not depend on a single learning pathway but can occur in a complementary manner through formal, non-formal, and informal pathways. In addition, this study enriches the theoretical understanding of EFL learners' learning experiences by providing insight into how they reflect on their English language learning journey, including the factors that support the development of their language skills and the challenges they face during the learning process.

2. Practical Implications

a. EFL Learners

For English language learners the findings of this study can serve as a guide to help them become more aware of various self-directed learning pathways, such as using entertainment media (movies, TV series, cartoons) as informal language learning tools, while also understanding

that the challenges they face such as nervousness or fear of making grammatical mistakes are common experiences that can be overcome with the right strategies.

b. English educators and teachers

For English language educators and teachers, these findings highlight the importance of understanding the experiences and challenges learners face throughout their language learning journey, as a basis for providing more targeted learning support. In addition, this study offers valuable insights for teachers on how learners use photographs to reflect on their language learning journey, thereby helping teachers understand the challenges learners face at each stage of that journey. This study also offers a new perspective for teachers on integrating visual methods into their teaching practices to enhance students' engagement, reflection, and motivation to learn.

c. Future Researchers

For future researchers, this study is expected to serve as a reference in developing research on the English language learning journeys of students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly through the use of the Photovoice approach to explore their experiences, reflections, and challenges. Future research could also expand on this study by involving different participants, learning contexts, or educational levels to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the

English learning journeys of EFL student