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NAVIGATING ENGLISH IN THE WORKPLACE: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES OF INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

The research addressed a lack of studies focusing on Indonesian migrant workers' personal language learning strategies across diverse host countries. Thus, it aimed to investigate the role of English for Indonesian Migrant Workers (henceforth, IMW), as well as the challenges related to English language use in their workplaces and how they address these problems. The research employs a qualitative research design, with semi-structured interviews as the primary research instrument. The interviews were conducted with ten Indonesian citizens who were working overseas during the data collection period and agreed to participate in this study. The findings show an awareness of the indispensability of English for effective communication at work and social mobility. However, this awareness emerges through the experience of various linguistic challenges. The experiences ranged from understanding broken, colloquial, and accented English to maximizing English input, such as listening to conversations in movies or English language programs online, taking an English course, and engaging in conversations in English. The research recommends that the authority provide intensive English training that encompasses basic English vocabulary, spoken colloquial English, including English slang, as well as English accents, with an emphasis on developing speaking and communication skills.

Keywords: *Indonesian migrant workers, English learning strategies, English accents*

INTRODUCTION

Working abroad has been a choice made by many Indonesians. The decision can be attributed to several factors, among others economy, social status, and culture. Higher wages or salaries offered have provided opportunities to improve the economic status of migrants' families, which would subsequently raise their own and their families' social status. As a result, in some communities, being an IMW has been a tradition passed down from one generation to the next, as in the case of female IMWs in Indramayu, West Java (Iqbal & Gusman, 2015).

Nevertheless, despite having the above potentials and benefits, IMWs have been reported to face numerous problems at their workplaces (Yuniarto, 2019). One of the major problems that has motivated the research is the low English language proficiency and fluency (see, for example, Indrayani, Dewi, & Qobulsyah, 2015; Ladegaard, 2020; Liao & Gan, 2020; Nahartini, Dewi, Fitriah, Defianty, & Anasy, 2021), which has resulted in the IMW's underpayment, as in the case of IMW in Hong Kong (Ladegaard, 2020) and inadequate work performance and opportunities for an improvement (Wang & Jing, 2018). Earlier studies have focused on general challenges faced by IMWs in a single host country, such as Hong Kong (Ladegaard, 2020; Liao & Gan, 2020) and Taiwan (Loveband, 2020; Yuniarto, 2019). The research extends previous work by focusing on informal English language learning strategies among IMWs working in diverse host countries. Therefore, the objective of the research is to examine the role of English used by IMWs, to explore the challenges associated with its use in the workplace, and how to cope with those challenges. It is expected that an understanding of the English

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language barriers and how the IWM addressed them would help policymakers make a total commitment to evaluate the existing English language program and provide a better English language learning facility.

The research used Krashen's (1982) acquisition-learning distinction in second language acquisition and optimal input as well as Swain's (2000) output hypothesis and Zimmerman's self-regulation theory as a theoretical framework. Krashen (1982) distinguished acquisition from learning because the former is believed to take place unconsciously, as when children go through the stages of being able to speak their first language, while the latter takes place consciously, as is reflected in the process of learning the vocabulary, patterns, and rules of a second language. Thus, the goal of second language learning is acquisition, and, according to Krashen (1982), this is possible when individuals are given sufficient comprehensible input, which focuses on meaning rather than form. However, it should be noted that acquisition may also take place in adulthood (Dąbrowska, Becker, & Miorelli, 2020). Meanwhile, the output hypothesis (Swain, 2000) posits that individuals' communicative activities provide opportunities to use and 'test' the second language knowledge they have possessed, and self-regulation is a "self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills" (Zimmerman, 2002). Though the research was conducted in a non-academic context, the self-regulation concept can be adapted to examine the IMWs' English language use (and learning process).

METHODS

The research is part of a larger investigation; therefore, it employed a qualitative approach and utilized a semi-structured interview as the primary data collection instrument. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian through WhatsApp personal chats and voice notes due to the long distance, different time zones, and schedule conflicts between the authors (who reside in Indonesia) and the informants (who were working overseas). Such situations made it possible to opt for using WhatsApp to collect data, an instrument that can be utilized in specific situations related to the informants (Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al., 2022). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and qualitatively categorized in line with the research's objectives (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). It should be noted that the research does not deal with a large amount of data, making it unnecessary to use a particular and sophisticated coding system and application. Code is viewed as a representation of the most essential and explicit data, and the theme is the result of the coding (Saldana, 2016). Thus, coding was conducted manually, and three themes were derived from the data, namely: (1) role of English at the workplace, (2) English language use-related problems, and (3) actions taken to solve the problems.

Consent from the interviewees had been obtained prior to the interviews. There were 10 participants involved, all of whom were IMW members of the Indonesian Diaspora Network Global (IDN Global), also referred to as IDN Global (Table 1 see Appendix). The interview questions centered upon the following items: (1) the interviewees' perceptions of the role of English for them in their workplaces, (2) the problems of English use at the workplaces, and (3) the strategies they implemented to deal with the problems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

For the participants, the role of the English language in the workplace means much more than a tool of communication. They emphasized that understanding messages in English would facilitate effective communication both at the horizontal and vertical levels (see Excerpt 1). For example, having a long working experience in the field of childcare (about 20 years), Ulfah shows an understanding of a holistic requirement of the role, which does not merely centers upon the service to the children, but also involves cooperation and collaboration with fellow co-workers and commitment to adhere to the system of the institutions she worked at, in which fluency in English is needed.

Excerpt 1.

Ulfah: Since many of us work in childcare, it's essential to understand and communicate effectively with our employers, colleagues, and the children we care for.

What Ulfah experienced may have indicated that (good) English was important. However, communication skills such as active listening, being able to give proper responses, showing empathy, respect, and friendliness were crucial, too. The findings are relevant to Ting, Marzuki, Chuah, Misieng, and Jerome's (2017) research, which suggested that fluency in English would support the display and improvement of communication skills. For some professions, such as therapists, caregivers, and coaches, good communication skills are more important than a strong command of the English language, while in other professions, such as frontline workers, marketers, and customer service representatives, fluency and proficiency in English should be prioritized over communication skills.

Excerpt 2.

Sulastri: [Good English skills] can... prevent misunderstanding arising from poor communication.

Effective communication can, first, help workers understand the needs of their employers or clients, as well as what is expected of them, and, at the same time, prevent any unnecessary misunderstandings (see Excerpt 2), which is crucial in their efforts to deliver

consistent professional performance. Zero or minimal misunderstanding at work is fundamental for those who work in companies that rely heavily on a good qualitative service to customers.

More importantly, serious and enduring efforts to avoid misunderstandings when accomplishing tasks and undertaking responsibilities at work can imply a high commitment to the institution they serve. That would help participants complete their work on time. Such high commitment would emanate trust not only from the superiors but also from colleagues. All of which would result in a positive working environment, which is essential for their well-being. Working in an established English-speaking country with a high standard of living, as shared by Darto (see Excerpt 3), is also beneficial.

Excerpt 3.

Darto: By avoiding misunderstandings with our employer, we can build trust and maintain positive relationships in the workplace.

Excerpt 4.

Darto: This [good English skills] enhances our job performance, boosts our confidence, and makes it easier to receive recognition from our employers.

The trust that the participants had received could lead to further appreciation from the employer or institutions (see Excerpt 4), such as a job promotion or a salary raise. This supports Chowdury and Erling's (2021) findings about Bangladeshi immigrant workers with a high commitment to learning English, earned trust, and good payment, which then enabled them to open their own businesses back in their home country. Similarly, Peltokorpi (2022) suggested that proficiency in English is associated with a good career for migrant workers and has been closely linked to promotions, salary increases, and improvements in social status. Subsequently, the promotion could contribute to their increasing productivity and self-confidence, as has been proven by Darto. These could generate motivation for demonstrating exceptional performance at work, which could be an assurance of their job tenure.

The above findings align with those of Cheng, Wang, Jiang, Taksa, and Tani (2020), who used panel data to indicate a positive relationship between better English ability and the opportunity to secure a job in Australia. On one extreme, good English would result in effective communication as illustrated in the above excerpts. However, on the other extreme, the above context may not always take place in other countries, for example, in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Norway. In the first two countries, proficiency in Cantonese or Mandarin is highly valued, whereas proficiency in English is less appreciated. In the third country, although English is the formal lingua franca among energy companies, the Norwegian language is widely used in daily communication among workers, and proficiency in that language could significantly impact one's career (Arum, 2024). Therefore, for a lot of female IMWs in Hong Kong, being unable to speak the two languages has made them underrated, underpaid, humiliated, and abused, as evident in Ladegaard's (2020) findings.

Despite the IMW's awareness of the importance of English fluency in their workplaces, it was also one of their major problems. Our data show that it was often problematic for them to understand the messages of their interlocutors as well as to make themselves understood by them, particularly when their first language was not English, as in Astuti's case (see Excerpt 5). Astuti had to communicate in English with people of different ages: the children of the family she was working with, the other workers in the family, and the employers. This implies a different level of complexity in the use of the English language due to age and educational factors.

Excerpt 5.

Astuti: As a migrant worker, I often encounter communication challenges when interacting with my [boss] children, who are still young and do not speak English. I also struggle to communicate with drivers who don't speak English, and sometimes find it difficult to explain things to my bosses or employers.

Astuti's experience reflected that communication problems may occur because they shared a similar language context: English is not their first language. Consequently, for this case (being IMW in Hong Kong), it should be Cantonese or Mandarin, and not English, that the IMW had to learn prior to their assignment there (cf. Ladegaard, 2020). Nevertheless, in a different context, e.g., in Taiwan, fluency and proficiency in English are much more valued than that in Chinese, especially for domestic work with children; even Taiwanese children have started learning English at school. Therefore, it was not the Indonesians (who had higher proficiency in Chinese), but the Filipino female workers who were preferred by Taiwanese employers seeking domestic workers. The English proficiency of the latter could be an advantage for families hiring them, as it can help their children become exposed to English at home (Loveband, 2004). Even for refugees, such as the Vietnamese refugees resettling in the United States, possessing basic English skills is essential, as it is one of the key factors influencing their social mobility there (Bankston III & Zhou, 2020).

IMW who possess low English fluency or have not received sufficient English language training (or have never got any opportunities of using English regularly) may have seen that working for foreign employers abroad, living there, as well as working with other workers from other countries would give them many chances to improve their English (see for example, Arum, 2024; Nugroho, Cho, & Collins, 2018). Factually, they may not always be able to meet

such expectations due to various factors, including a lack of a suitable environment in which to practice speaking English and improve their English skills, a heavy workload, and irregular working hours (see Excerpt 6).

Excerpt 6.

Darto: Before coming to Oman, my English skills were poor, which made it challenging as a migrant worker. Even after arriving, I struggled to communicate with my employer and had no one to practice my English with. It's been difficult to improve, especially since my work hours can be unpredictable. When I do meet Indonesian friends, most of them can't speak English, so we stick to Indonesian. Another obstacle has been my employer's poor English pronunciation, as he is an Arabic speaker who's not fluent in English.

The fact that the employer does not speak fluent English, as the above excerpt illustrates, was a logical consequence of English being a lingua franca rather than a national language. Nevertheless, English in the Emirates appears to be gaining ground as a second language, with many Arabic speakers exhibiting a positive attitude towards it. However, Arabic remains a prestigious heritage language (Siemund, Al-Issa, Rahbari, & Leimgruber, 2021). Meanwhile, the issue of unpredictable working hours was common in many cases, such as in Hong Kong. It was impossible for the IMW to speak English not only because no one around them spoke the language fluently, but they were also forced to work very long hours, and sometimes more than one job, which was illegal (Ladegaard, 2020).

In addition, the IMW were surprised to learn that different English accents could be a source of communication problems. Some of them admitted that comprehending utterances in English has been a challenge, let alone understanding English spoken with accents they were not familiar with. Sulastri, for example, emphasized the importance of recognizing and familiarizing herself with the accents in their day-to-day communication at work (see Excerpt 7).

Excerpt 7.

Sulastri: When I started working in Australia, I faced challenges with the accent and slang used by locals. It was different from what I was used to, and I was surprised to learn about the many accents in Australia. It has not been easy to communicate with locals, especially those who speak English as their first language. This is particularly true for Indonesians and Asians, who may struggle to understand the accent and slang.

For Sulastri, understanding the Australian accent, as well as colloquial and slang words, was equally important as knowing the terminology at her workplace. This is similar to the role of non-standard varieties of English in Singapore (Singlish), which is the variety that marks local solidarity and should be used in informal situations and interactions by migrants, should they wish to be accepted in their milieu (Lu, 2021). Thus, it was essential for her to acquire Australian English so that she could be accepted in her workplace. She did not want to sound or be different from the local people, at least in terms of the English language use, one thing that she thought she could change (as opposed to the inherent and inherited aspects like her race, ethnicity, and physical traits). Sulastri's experience reflects the fact that English is "the required linguistic capital" (Canagarajah, 2016, p. 48), which can play an important role in the success of their migration (Giampapa & Canagarajah, 2017).

The IMW recognized that they needed to address the challenges of using the English language in order to thrive and succeed as expatriates. Thus, they believed that there were two major skills that they needed to develop and practice: listening and speaking skills. They were aware that they needed extensive exposure to English utterances and were able to identify sources that they could access easily, such as entertainment programs on social media (see Excerpt 8) and online, free or commercial English learning programs (see Excerpt 9).

Excerpt 8.

Astuti: . . . to listen to and watch films or listen to music [lyrics] and conversations on YouTube and pay close attention to the meaning and pronunciation.

For Astuti, being able to use English properly entails a large vocabulary and an understanding of how it is pronounced. She chose to use movies and songs from YouTube to expand her vocabulary and learn their pronunciation. It seems that to her, learning should be enjoyable and fun so that it will last long. Nevertheless, learning from social media has its own drawbacks, such as the absence of real, face-to-face interactions that are rich in natural non-verbal expressions and their diverse contextual meanings; it is also inappropriate for individuals with a lack of self-autonomy (Purwanti, Suwastini, Adnyani, & Kultsum, 2022).

Similar to Astuti, Darto (Excerpt 9) also made use of social media not only to learn but also to improve his English. He believed that a lot of input in English would be the prerequisite for being able to speak the language smoothly. Both participants seemed to be autonomous learners, a characteristic that appears to be shared by migrant workers (Hakim, Khoirunnisa, Fadli, & Adnan, 2023). However, for Darto, some external assistance would help him learn more effectively. Therefore, in addition to independent learning, he took an English course for the IMW. By doing that, Darto intentionally gave himself more opportunities and exposure to the English language.

Research has shown that joining an English training program was a decision that has been proven effective in increasing migrant workers' English proficiency (Cheng et al., 2021).

Excerpt 9.

Darto: My strategy to improve my English skills at work is to listen to YouTube videos. However, sometimes I need help understanding everything I hear. Fortunately, there's an English language program for Indonesian migrant workers provided by the Oman diaspora. I joined this program to learn English.

Parallel to the above strategies, the IMW agrees that speaking English most of the time would help them become fluent speakers. For instance, Ulfah preferred to be talkative and have conversations with her employers and their families (Excerpt 10). She learned that there were abundant English learning sources available at her workplace, namely the conversations between family members, which were freely present every day. She even viewed the language spoken by children at her workplace as a valuable learning source. For Ulfah, what was initially a source of English language problems turned out to be a potential learning input. Research has shown that migrants with good English language skills are more resilient culturally and psychologically, as they tend to have higher self-efficacy and confidence (Cheng et al., 2021).

Excerpt 10.

Ulfah: I improve my English through daily conversations with my employers and the children I care for. Since many children are around, we often learn from each other . . .

Excerpt 11.

Wawan: The best way to improve our English skills is to speak it every day. It's also helpful to talk to fluent English speakers, so we can learn from them and get some feedback.

Meanwhile, other IWMs preferred having conversations with friends in both real and virtual settings. Some would think that talking to fluent English speakers would provide valuable and ample learning experiences without delay, as admitted by Wawan (see Excerpt 11). The English learning strategies they used lend support to the fundamental role of optimal input (Krashen, 1982) in overcoming the difficulties of using English for communication. They chose learning sources that were stimulating or interesting, such as movies and songs (from social media and the Internet), from which they could learn meanings and have control over the level of adequacy in the learning process. Entertaining sources surely do not offer any explanation about the rules for using English properly or accurately. Therefore, they also took an English course where they could learn from a teacher's explanation. Another strategy they applied was speaking in English as much as possible, whenever they could, with the people around them so that they could also learn from and reflect upon the 'output,' i.e., the language they produce orally (Swain, 2000). This is in line with the vital role of output in English language learning; interactions are believed to be a valuable learning source from which they can 'notice' the appropriateness and accuracy of their utterances as well as learn from their own mistakes.

Equally important is the fact that IMW has demonstrated a deep understanding of the role of English, namely as a vehicle of communication that goes beyond the accuracy of form but deciphering various meanings through verbal and non-verbal production of language from English and non-English speakers and those speaking English with various accents in the countries of employment. The 'payoff' of a good command of English and effective communication skills is trust from both horizontal and vertical lines in their workplaces, which can result in increased job tenure and security. All of this has shown that they are self-regulated individuals (Zimmerman, 2002) who have learned from their professional experiences and personality traits so that they can be aware of their weaknesses and potential in trying to be able to speak English (their goals). They seek help in their personal learning process and use a variety of learning strategies and reflect upon them, too, so that they can reach their personal learning goals amidst their heavy responsibilities in their workplaces.

CONCLUSIONS

To this point, we have presented an examination of the role of English to a group of IMW working and residing in several countries, i.e., Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Kenya, Singapore, Oman, Turkey, and USA, the problems they faced when they had to use English, as well as their strategies to overcome those problems. Our qualitative analysis indicates that despite the professions they went into, all of them approved of the critical role of English to support them in performing their day-to-day tasks. Good English facilitates effective communication at their workplaces, social mobility, and, more importantly, their self-efficacy. Nevertheless, they admitted that during the adjustment period, they encountered problems in communication due to their or their employers' low proficiency and fluency in English. In addition, they struggled to understand the English spoken by adults, children, or the elderly, as well as the accented English. Although they desire to develop their English, not all of them have the opportunity to do so due to their irregular workload and long working hours. Despite all the challenges, those who could get the opportunity to learn English shared their strategies to develop their English, i.e., exposing themselves

to English conversations in films or videos on social media, paying close attention to conversations with their employers, families of the employers and co-workers, joining online or offline English learning program, and talk in English as much as they can. All of these reflect the importance of both input and output in the process of learning a second language learning. One interesting point that policymakers can consider is the specific needs of each group of IMW in relation to their destination country. Even though English is the world's lingua franca, our findings suggest that an adequate knowledge of the basic vocabulary of the national language (e.g., Cantonese, Mandarin, Arabic, Malay) of the country they are sent to is very crucial. Another essential point is having some basic knowledge of the varieties of English, given that not all of the IMW's destination countries position English as their national or official language.

The small scale and scope of the research have made its findings contextual and may not be applicable to other similar cases involving English language use. Therefore, we recommend adopting a more inclusive method, such as ethnography, to obtain richer and more comprehensive data. Alternatively, a quantitative data collection instrument, such as a survey, can also be considered for a wider population of IMW. Meanwhile, the scope of the can be extended to their attitude and behaviour towards not only English, but also the national languages, and how they learn and use them in their daily communication.

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APPENDIX

Table 1 The interviewees' education, work history, and country of employment

No.	Pseudonym	Education	Occupation	Work experience	Country
1	Tukini	Senior High School	Restaurant worker	Less than a year	Japan
2	Astuti	Senior High School	Domestic worker	15-20 years	Hongkong
3	Ulfah	Undergraduate	Caregiver	More than 20 years	Singapore
4	Darto	Undergraduate	Factory worker	More than 20 years	Oman
5	Anik	Undergraduate	Restaurant worker	Less than 1 year	Turkey
6	Wawan	Senior High School	Photographer	10-15 years	USA
7	Aisyah	Junior High School	Housekeeper	More than 20 years	Kenya
8	Tata	Senior High School	Shopkeeper	1-5 years	China
9	Sulastri	Senior High School	Club worker	1-5 years	Australia
10	Jumadi	Diploma	General worker	1-5 years	Canada