

“I Prefer to Take an Intensive English Course”: A Study on Indonesian Gap-Year Students

Muhammad Ghufran Sulaeman¹ and Nina Desmita²

¹Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

Abstract: *It is widely acknowledged that senior high school graduates in Indonesia are expected to commence their studies shortly after graduation. However, this commonality does not apply to certain groups of students who are categorized as gap-year students. Some reasons such as economic factors, self-discovery, the dilemma on the future carrier are probably the considerations why senior high school graduates postpone to commence their studies to the universities for a while. Interestingly, scarce investigations are done to unveil pedagogical reasons behind this phenomenon. Anchored by this very fact, the present study attempts to explore three Indonesian senior high school graduates' motives as gap-year students. Two of them already passed their gap-year program while another one was still ongoing. A semi-structured interview was done to generate data from the participants. This study documented that the participants opted for an intensive English course prior to attending university learning. They also shared that the intensive course was used as self-enhancement both for academic English exposure that they would receive in the university and for social life to gain better future carrier in certain workplaces where English is highly needed.*

Keywords: *gap-year, intensive English course, high school graduates, education*

1. Introduction

After graduating from high school, the university is a destination for some students throughout the world to continue their studies. Variations in majors at the university sometimes make some students confused. The high cost of continuing study or the difficulty of passing an exam to apply to university is also a barrier for some students who cannot immediately continue their studies. Therefore, groups of students choose not to continue their studies. They decide to take a break of the year, or it is called as gap-year. Gap year is a period of time taken away from formal education to pursue experiential learning and self-discovery. According to Simpson (2005), gap-year is period of time for young people to do some activities such as travelling abroad, participating in volunteer activity or doing paid work. Jones (2004) gives broad definition regarding gap years. He believes that it is not limited to traveling, volunteer activity or working in companies. However, it is about individuals who leave or postpone formal education, learning or work places to have a pause or a rest during a period of 3-24 months.

Due to the large number of students who take a gap year before they continue their formal studies at the higher education level, the interest in researching this case is increasing worldwide. Not only in Europe country such as Netherlands (Hermann, Peters, & Trijp, 2017), but also America (Guidi, 2018). This case also became interesting topic in Asian Country such as China (Wu, Pearce, Huang, & Fan, 2014) and Malaysia (Hamid et al., 2019).

The research on gap-year not only having variance in the country where it happened but in variance of activity that some students choose to pass their gap year. The first gap year activity is volunteering, the research showed that volunteering could make the students gain better personal, civic, moral, intellectual and citizen of

character (Shea, 2011). Gap year activity also can be passed by taking summer program (Wachen, Pretlow, & Dixon, 2018), learning about tourism marketing (Wu et al., 2014) or traveling (Luzecka & Luzecka, 2016).

Taking a gap year before continue study to higher level of education brings many positive effects to personal of gapers. A gap year activity will help to improve personal developmental process especially developing the purpose and integrity (Moreau, 2017). A gap year also improve behavioral and cognitive engagement of gapers, hence when they continue their study, they can face it better than others (Rooij, Jansen, & Grift, 2017). Personal growth as one of positive effect from gap year activity give influence to the gapers to have a power to take a decision toward them self and put off from authoritarian parents (Youth, 2016), (Golan & Goldberg, 2019), (Earnshaw, 2018) and (Tron, 2019). The gap year program also helps the gap takers to find the identity work from them, therefore they could decide the type of job or future carrier for themselves (Snee, 2013).

Interestingly, in Indonesia, some students take an English Course on purpose as their gap year activity. This choice is very unique and different from other previous studies. When other students try to enroll higher education level as soon as possible while some students in this program choose to postpone their study and took an English course. This case already happened in a few years meanwhile a few study have been conducted related to this case especially from gap takers perspective in taking a gap year. Hence, this present study tries to explore deeply the consideration of the gap takers in taking an English course as their gap year activity and the perceptions after taking an English course before they continue their study.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The criteria have been set by researchers to choose the most qualified subject to this research. The researchers set three main criteria: 1) having experience in taking gap year by following English Course; 2) on-going students who take study in domestic university or overseas university after taking gap year; 3) on going gap year takers. Those criteria have the purpose to make the subject of this research be more variance and to enrich to achieve the objective of the research. From those criteria, the researchers took three of the most appropriate subjects in the population. The subjects of this study were three gap-year takers based on criteria that set by researcher. All three subjects took the intensive English Course at Test-English School in Pare-Kediri east Java province of Indonesia. The data was generated on September 2019.

The first subject was Afkar, 22 years old. He already took an intensive English course for eight months in year 2015-2016. Currently, he is an undergraduate student in Universitas Ahmad Dahlan Yogyakarta, Indonesia majoring English Literature at the seventh semester. The second subject was Arras, 19 years old. She already had passed the gap-year program in year 2017-2018 for eight months. She began her formal education journey in 2019 in onyedi Eylül Üniversitesi, Turkey, majoring International Relationship. The last was Annisa, 18 years old. When the data was gathered, she was still ongoing gap-year program for seven months.

2.2. Data Collection and Procedures

Since the purpose of this study to explore deeply the consideration of students in taking an intensive English course and to know their perceptions after taking the gap year program. Therefore, a case study has been deployed as the research design of this study.

Semi-structured interview guideline was used to capture the consideration of the gap-year students in taking an intensive English Course and their perception after taking it. The interview was conducted to the subjects separately. They were asked in different day one-by-one. The individual interview spent one hour to take their consideration and perceptions toward this gap year program. Each of respondent accepted almost fifteen questions related to their consideration and perception. The interview results were processed by making the interview transcript. Then, the researchers tried to classify the interview transcript based on the themes of this research to make the result can be described clearly. The researchers also read the results continuously to obtain the meaning and emerging the themes.

2.3. Data Analysing

Triangulation process was the way that researchers chose to analyze the data. The triangulation process started from the data reduction process, so the researchers tried to select the most appropriate data with the objective of this study. The selected data passed the process of comparison with some previous theories to enrich the best conclusion of the research. The researcher also did confirmation process to the subject to avoid the bias information and to increase the trustworthiness of the research. At the last, the researcher brought the data into the data display process. The researcher displayed the data by describing the result based on the themes that have been decided at the first. Therefore, the result of this study can be presented clearly and the data did not be overgeneralized.

3. Findings

To begin with, this study presents the results of the interview conducted to the subjects. There are four main points of interview; students' background knowledge of gap-year, motives of taking an intensive English course as their gap-year program, and the effect after taking gap-year program.

3.1. Students' Background Knowledge

The researcher attempted to find out the subjects' prior knowledge about gap-year. All three subjects were asked whether they were familiar with gap-year or not. Overall, all three subjects had similar responses which gap-year is postponing to commence formal education intentionally in order to do some better activities. Annisa and Afkar gave more detail answers. They provided example activities such as volunteering, working, travelling, learning languages, and improving soft skill. Anissa narrated that;

“Actually, the Gap year program is the common sense in Indonesia for senior high school graduates. The main Indonesian high school graduates' reason is because they failed to pass the entrance test of the top universities in Indonesia, so that they postpone their formal education, and then taking a gap-year program to prepare themselves for the next year test. Moreover, for me as the gap year taker, the duration of a gap-year program was at least three months.”

On the other hand, Afkar provided a few information toward the gap year program, he said that

“I know gap year as general definition, where the gap year is a period of time to postpone the study by following some activities such as volunteering, traveling, working and taking a course. Therefore, for my gap year, I took English course”

The last respondent told that, she had the information about the gap year from her friends. She narrated that

“In the past, I did not know about the gap year term, but after I told to my friend to postpone my study, he told that it was known as gap year students and he gave more explanation toward the gap year. Hence, I knew what gap year is”

Therefore, from those statements, it can be concluded that three of respondents have sufficient background knowledge about the gap year.

3.2. Motives of Taking Intensive English Course

The subjects were questioned about their reasons why they prefer to take an intensive English course comparing to other activities such as working, travelling, and volunteering. Surprisingly, there was the same answer from them. They said that they do not need to work because their financial support from their parents is sufficient for their living. However, all of them said that English is highly needed for their future.

According to Afkar, he claimed himself having poor English abilities, thus, when he just graduated from senior high school, he did not take the entrance test of the university since English is one of the tests. He believed he could not make it. Meanwhile, Arras shared her reasons why she took an intensive English course

since she wanted to study abroad in which English is required. She wanted to achieve proper TOEFL score as the requirement to study overseas.

In addition, Annisa shared a different story why she decided taking intensive English course. After graduating from senior high school, she had no plan to continue her study in university, but she wanted to be a police woman and being a part of The Indonesian National Police. To have such occupation, there are many kinds of test should be passed, and one of the tests is English test. Unfortunately, she gained low score of the English test. Hence, she decided learning English intensively by taking intensive English course.

So, it can be concluded that the main motive of taking intensive English course because of they wanted to develop their English skills for and the influence of parents or suggestion from friends.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked their reasons why choosing Test-English Course as the place to learn English. Afkar responded that;

“I choose Test-English School because recommendation from my cousin, Fajar. My cousin was a student in that course. I can see his improvement, and then I asked him where he learn English. My cousin also promoted Test-English School to study English because its program. In There, the schedule is very tight, we study English starting from morning at 6 to evening at 9”

Moreover, Aras and Annisa knew the information about Test-English School from Instagram. Arras narrated that;

“at the time I intentionally seek the place to study English, especially to improve my TOEFL score, and then I search in Instagram, and I found Test-English School, I see the program and the length of the study, it is very long time, so that I decided to register in that course because I can study intensively, and it uses dormitory system”

On the other hand, Annisa narrated that;

“I knew that course from Instagram, there is a posting about learning english intensively, so I stalk it and then I am interested to take that course because the program and the testimony given on that posting”

By understanding the respondents' answers, it can be concluded that they know the gap-year program from recommendation of friends and from advertisement on Instagram.

3.3. The Effect after taking an Intensive English Course

The results of this study revealed that there were significant improvements of their English abilities. According to Afkar, he claimed that;

“I feel my English abilities improve significantly especially in speaking and writing. Before I took English course, my English was very bad. I couldn't speak and writing in English at all. But after the process, I am confident to speak and able to write in long paragraphs”

Similar statement from Annisa stated that;

“I have been studying for four months, and I can feel myself improve in mastering English especially for communication. Now I can communicate using English even though my grammar still need improvement. My writing and reading also improve very significant. Now I can understand some basic reading passages and can write my personal journal. I believe after I finish this program, I can pass the English test to become a police woman what I want the most to be”

Meanwhile, According to Arras, she said that;

“my sacrifice, learning 8 months intensively is paid off. My TOEFL ITP score improve significantly from 380 to 510, and I can study here in overseas. My English helps me to understand people saying in my collage. It helps me survive to study here in Turkey. And the most important is that I can understand many literatures written in English to help me undergo my study”

Furthermore, Afkar shared his experience when he just a freshman in his university. He claimed himself having better English proficiency than his classmates. He stated also that his English helped him to run his study since his major is English Literature.

From the subjects' responses, it is noticeable to see that their English abilities are improved significantly especially speaking and writing skills. It can be concluded that they are satisfied because English is able to help them obtaining their needs particularly to deal with English exposure in their living in university and to communicate other people from other different countries.

4. Discussions

Based on the purpose of this study is to explore deeply the consideration of students in taking an intensive English course and to find out their perceptions after taking the gap year program. Therefore, the results of this study provided the answers that have relation to the objective of this study. The results of this study showed that there are some considerations why they took English course as their gap year program. The first reason is because of the needs of having good English abilities to pass some examinations. The respondents thought that they have to improve their English to deal with the examination. Since improving language ability is included in the improvement of intelligence quality, therefore, this finding is related with the benefit of taking a gap year which stated that taking a gap year program will make students be better than before including the intelligence (Shea, 2011).

The second reason is support from their parents to be their consideration in taking an English course. Taking the English course as the gap year needs much money and the students have to stay in a dormitory to take English course as the part of gap-year program. Therefore, the results showed that support from parents is needed and important as the consideration in taking English course as the gap year activity. This result is opposite with the finding of previous study which stated that gap year make the students to be more independent in taking a decision (Youth, 2016). It can be concluded that the needs to develop their English and support from their parents are mains consideration to take an English course as the gap year activity.

Meanwhile for the second objective of this research, the results showed that the students have positive perceptions toward their decision to take English course as their gap year activity. It is showed by their statements that taking English course give many positive effects for them especially for the developing their language and improving English language ability can help them to face better future. They can use their ability to the needs of their study and also their future job. These results are in line with previous studies showed that the gap year has positive effect for the gap year takers such as to improve behavioral and cognitive engagement (Rooij, Jansen, & Grift, 2017), and finding the identity work and future carrier (Snee, 2013).

5. Conclusions

Gap year is not always caused by economic factor or unpreparedness of students to continue their study in higher level. This research already shown that the gap year can happen because of big needs to personal development such as language ability. The gap year also can be taken as the preparation program to pass the examination to achieve higher education. Taking English course as one of gap year activity has good impact to gap takers, especially for the gap takers who need to develop their language skills. However, the limitation of this research that only saw English course as the gap year activity from students' perspective and it does not look deeply from English course providers can be a chance for further research.

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