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## The Motivations of Learning Foreign Languages: A Descriptive Case Study of Polyglots

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## The Motivations of Learning Foreign Languages: A Descriptive Case Study of Polyglots

### Abstract

Polyglots are extraordinary people in terms of language ability. Therefore, it is interesting to academically explore their motivations for learning several languages. This research is novel compared to previous studies because scant extant research exists of polyglots' motivation for learning several languages. To this end, researchers collected data from semi structured interviews obtained from five informants. The method that we used was a descriptive case study. Findings showed that the polyglots' motivation for learning multiple foreign languages were (a) pleasure, (b) social intercourse, (c) professional purposes, and (d) academic purposes. Mostly, the previous research revealed that motivation for people learning foreign languages were for social interaction, professional reasons, and academic purposes. Meanwhile, the motivation of polyglots for learning many languages besides those three motivations was for pleasure. This is the key point behind their commitment to sustainable multiple language learning.

### Keywords

motivation, polyglots, learning, foreign languages, descriptive case study

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## **The Motivations of Learning Foreign Languages: A Descriptive Case Study of Polyglots**

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Polyglots are extraordinary people in terms of language ability. Therefore, it is interesting to academically explore their motivations for learning several languages. This research is novel compared to previous studies because scant extant research exists of polyglots' motivation for learning several languages. To this end, researchers collected data from semi structured interviews obtained from five informants. The method that we used was a descriptive case study. Findings showed that the polyglots' motivation for learning multiple foreign languages were (a) pleasure, (b) social intercourse, (c) professional purposes, and (d) academic purposes. Mostly, the previous research revealed that motivation for people learning foreign languages were for social interaction, professional reasons, and academic purposes. Meanwhile, the motivation of polyglots for learning many languages besides those three motivations was for pleasure. This is the key point behind their commitment to sustainable multiple language learning.

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As a multilingual country, the people of Indonesia have a good chance of becoming polyglots. This is based on the reality that hundreds of regional languages are spoken in Indonesia (Cohn & Ravindranath, 2014; Marcellino, 2008). To bridge communication nationally, the Indonesian language unites different vernaculars: the form of a language that a particular group of speakers use naturally (Dardjowidjojo, 1998; Goebel, 2002; Paauw, 2009). Furthermore, there are two common foreign languages Indonesian people learn, including English and Arabic. English is taught as a compulsory subject in all educational institutions in Indonesia. Teaching Arabic is restricted to the schools affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Habibi et al., 2018; Bin Tahir, 2015). Whereas other foreign languages such as German, Mandarin, French, and others, appear to be less-commonly-taught languages in the schools.

The diversity of language in Indonesia has given an opportunity to the people of Indonesia to learn three forms of languages: regional, national, and foreign (Noprival et al., 2019). Speaking of local languages in Indonesia, there are more than six hundred languages that exist in this archipelago country (Jakarta, 2017). However, Indonesian people speak either their regional languages or the national Indonesian language more frequently than others (Aziz,

2003; Zakaria, 2016). On the other hand, to master foreign languages is quite a challenge in Indonesia. Although people have access to learn foreign languages at school, exposure to those spoken languages both inside and outside of educational institutions is near inexistent. So, those who are motivated to learn multiple foreign languages, polyglots, are privileged as they do not only depend on formal education, but also informal education (Noprival et al., 2019). And it is far from uncommon across Indonesia for people to learn many foreign languages.

Several researchers have done the studies on multilingual acquisition and learning (Bin Tahir, 2015; Chevalier, 2012; Clark & Gruba, 2010; Conteh & Riasat, 2014; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Hopf et al., 2016; Maneva, 2004; Marten & Mostert, 2012; Moore, 2010). Moreover, Noprival et al. (2019), Alkire (2005), and Krashen and Kiss (1996) specifically have explored how polyglots acquire many languages. While a growing body of previous studies has addressed multilingual acquisition and learning, which refers to any forms of languages, including foreign ones; in fact, little research explores the motivation of polyglots to learn many foreign languages. Most of the previous studies explored the motivation of learning only one language. Giles (2016), for example, discussed the motivations of non-Irish learners of the Irish language in North America. The next, Aladdin (2011) addressed the motivation of non-Muslim students in one university in Malaysia learning Arabic. Furthermore, Bateman and Oliveira (2014) did research on motivation of the Spanish-speaking students in learning Portuguese. Also, Pratt, Agnello, and Santos (2009) investigated factors that motivate high-school students' decisions to study Spanish in West Texas, United States.

The purpose of this current study was to explore in-depth the motivations of the Indonesian polyglots for learning several foreign languages. Understanding the motivation of Indonesian polyglots may bring positive impacts; more specifically, it may help many stakeholders, including, language learners, language teachers, and language policy makers working within the context of language education. This expectation is relevant to Dörnyei's (1994) and Gardner's (1985) studies stating that there is a significant relevance between motivation and successful second language learning.

### **The Context of the Researchers**

The first author for this study received his doctoral degree from the Department of Language Education in one public university in Jakarta, Indonesia. His research interest is in the area of multiple language acquisition and learning. For current research, he and two other researchers specifically explore Indonesian polyglots' motivations for learning several foreign languages. The first author collaborated with the other two authors who share the same interest in the area of language learning.

Since our focus is exploring the motivations of polyglots for learning many languages, as the researchers we are sharing our own foreign language learning motivations and experiences. For example, the first author had experiences in learning foreign languages, including: English, Arabic, and Hindi. He was motivated to learn English and Arabic because these two languages were mandatory subjects in his schooling. He formally learned English starting in middle school; however, he was first introduced to English when he was in elementary school. Around the same time, he began studying English, he was exposed to Arabic in an Islamic middle school for three years. Also, he was exposed to Hindi when he did a master's degree in India for two years. He learned Hindi for social interaction, meanwhile the medium of instruction in his university was English. For the second and the third author they had similar foreign language learning motivations and experiences. They studied English and Arabic through formal education. Their motivation to learn both languages were for academic purposes. For learning Arabic, they also were motivated by professional purposes since both have been being Arabic teaching staff in their respective university.

## Method of Research

### Research Design

Since the researchers sought a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting, a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007; Gay et al., 2012; Nunan 2010) seemed to be more appropriate to achieve the purpose of this study. Generally, Merriam (1998) stated that a qualitative case study was “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). In this study, we specifically used a descriptive case study (Yin, 2018). We chose a descriptive case study, because we want to focus on describing a phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2018). In this case, we discussed in-depth information about the motivations of Indonesian polyglots for learning many foreign languages.

### Participants

We invited the polyglots to participate in this study. The participant selection was based on those who have mastered at least three foreign languages and were available to be interviewed many times. It was not easy to find them, that is why we took a long time to find the informants to collect the data. In Indonesia it was easier to find polyglots who spoke local languages than those who spoke foreign languages.

We have organized a composite description of our participants revealed from interviews relating to multiple language ability. In this study, we only focused on foreign language learning, so the mother tongue of all participants was excluded. There were five participants that voluntarily participated during collecting data, they were Adi, Dila, Tono, Tahfiz, and Yuyus (pseudonyms). They are Indonesian polyglots who have different backgrounds in education, including: Industrial Engineering, Communication, Accounting, and another two participants completed their study in English Language Teaching. All of them are able to speak English; meanwhile, only three of them can use Arabic. They had also mastered less-commonly-taught languages in Indonesia, including Hindi, Russian, Italian, Dutch, and so forth. Generally, they acquired many languages through instructed learning, extra amounts of languages input beyond the classroom, learning languages autonomously, and acculturating with a new language group in society (Noprival et al., 2019).

### Data Collection, Data Analysis, and Trustworthiness

In this research, data collection consisted of an in-depth interview. First, we arranged a list of interview questions as the protocol. As recommended by Yin (2018), a protocol was developed to guide data collection for the case study. The interview data were collected through a semi structured interview which was conducted individually at a location of informants' choice for around eight months (December 2017 to July 2018). The language used during data collection was Indonesian. We convinced our participants their participation was voluntary, and their statement would be treated confidentially. Additionally, they had the right not to answer the interview questions and to stop their participation in our study any time they wanted. Thankfully in the actual interview, all our participants were helpful and cooperative in giving information. Each of them was interviewed more than once to gain more data and clarify previous data that they had given. We also spent much time with participants until our data got saturation point, as Creswell stated: “qualitative researchers strive for understanding, that deep structure of knowledge that comes from visiting personally with participants, spending extensive time in the field, and probing to obtain detailed meanings” (2007, p. 201).

According to Yin (2018), there are five analytic techniques: pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis. In this study, we used pattern matching by comparing or matching the pattern based on the collected data with a pattern defined prior to data collection. We predicted five patterns, stated as propositions, as our first data analysis strategy for case study research. It means we provided tentative motivations of Indonesian polyglots for learning many foreign languages such as learning foreign languages for (a) pleasure, (b) social intercourse, (c) religious purposes, (d) professional purposes, and (e) academic purposes. After that, we confirmed with the data interviews by starting with coding categories. For example:

**Table 1**

*Initial Proposition: Academic Purposes*

<b>Coding category</b>	<b>Verbatim</b>
Academic Purposes	I have started learning English since I was in the fourth grade of Primary School. It was one of core subjects in my school. (Tahfiz)
	My dream was to continue my study in Belgium in which three languages are spoken there; those are Dutch, French, and German. That is why I have learnt [these three languages]. (Tono)
	I got a scholarship to continue my master's degree in Russia. The problem is the medium of instruction is Russian. So, I had to join language training for one year in Russia. (Yuyus)
	I got a lot of exposure to Arabic when I was a junior student of Islamic boarding school. Arabic is not only a core subject but also a medium of daily communication in pesantren [Islamic school in Indonesia]. (Dila)

After we found the coding category that emerged from words and phrases which represented the regularities, patterns, and topics our data covered. Then, we compared coding category with the initial proposition, it was found that coding category supported the proposition. So, we decided the initial proposition as the final proposition.

In this study, we analyzed and reanalyzed the individual interview line by line. As Saldaña (2009) suggested, to get proper qualitative research findings data should be analyzed multiple times. Going through all the tentative motivations, we finally identified overarching motivations of Indonesian polyglots for learning many foreign languages, including for pleasure, social intercourse, professional purposes, and academic purposes. In other words, we eliminated one initial proposition “religious purposes” because it did not match with the coding category after we analyzed the data.

We used “trustworthiness” to verify the accuracy of data, finding, and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We returned the transcription of interviews to the participants (member checking) to check what we have recorded and transcribed were matched with their standpoints (Koelsch, 2013). By doing member checking, it is a chance of getting new information that the participant may not have given during initial data collection (Yin, 2014).

Also, our research conducted prolonged engagement and repeated interviews (Creswell, 2007). We had a good relationship and maintained close communication with the participants during data collection so that the participants were cooperatively to be interviewed many times to get in-depth information.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Even though an Institutional Review Board (IRB) process is not common in Indonesia, we guaranteed our participants confidentiality. We protected the rights of our participants by concealing the names of people, places, and the research site through the use of a pseudonym was the way we protect the right of the participants. Also, we kept all data confidential and private, that is, we were the only persons with access to the data during and after the research study.

### **Findings**

The findings in this study were presented based on the answers of the research question: “What motivates Indonesian polyglots to learn several foreign languages?” From the data analysis revealed that the polyglots’ motivation for learning multiple foreign languages were (a) pleasure, (b) social intercourse, (c) professional purposes, and (d) academic purposes.

#### **Learning Foreign Languages for Pleasure**

People have a certain orientation in learning a foreign language. Sometimes they just do it for enjoyment. In this study, we found this kind of participants’ motivation to learn foreign languages is due to cultural interest. According to Csizer and Dornyei (2005), cultural interest refers to the appreciation of cultural products affiliated with the second language and it is conveyed by media (e.g., films, videos, TV programs, pop music, magazines, and books).

The informants in this research, the polyglots, revealed that one of their motivations for learning foreign languages was for pleasure. For example, “My hobby is learning French since I love to read the novel and to watch the film. Even though not many people around me have the same interest, I keep motivating myself to learn it. When I did my diploma at [Indonesian College of Accountancy] STAN, I also took a French course,” Tahfiz reported. Similarly, Tono stated, “I like watching a Hollywood movie. It is one of the motivations to learn the language [English].”

#### **Learning Foreign Languages for Social Intercourse**

The former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, stated, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart” (Chabalala, 2018, para. 7). Implicitly, his words would encourage people to learn a second or foreign language to reach better communication among cultural diversity in terms of language.

In this study, learning foreign languages for social intercourse also emerged from the data analysis. For example, Tono said, “I used to frequently receive the tourists from Spain staying at my house in a certain period of time. It motivates me to learn Spanish. Also, I have the experience to practice my Spanish when I was travelling to Spain.” On the other hand, living abroad also encouraged polyglots to learn foreign languages. For instance, Dila reported, “I am motivated to practice English as my daily communication when I was in India, especially

with foreign students. Sometimes I also used English for interacting with local people since English is a second language there [India].”

### **Learning Foreign Languages for Professional Purposes**

Learning foreign languages is one of the skills used in the field of work. Certain workplaces need a foreign language skill, like working as a diplomat, a tourist guide, international trade, and others. In this study, all participants confirmed the motive of learning English was to support their career. For example, Tahfiz reported, “I frequently use English to search for information related to my job, especially about tax. So, I am working by learning.” Besides English, other foreign languages were also learned for the purposes of career benefits. Adi, for instance, reflected, “My motivation to learn Italian was in order to be easy to communicate with people in the workplace, since I was a waiter in a restaurant where the guests were mostly Italian; even the owner is an Italian national.” Additionally, Yuyus stated, “When I was in high school, my dream was to be a diplomat someday. It really motivated me to learn French. Even though my dream does not come true, it does not matter at least I master some foreign languages.”

### **Learning Foreign Languages for Academic Purposes**

One of the processes in acquiring a foreign language is through instructed language learning (Ellis, 1994, 2005; Ortega, 2013). Institutional education could be a language environment that is expected to enrich foreign language ability. In Indonesia, foreign languages are a component in the education curriculum. In this study, all the participants admitted the motivation for learning English was due to a compulsory subject at the educational institution. For example, Tahfiz reported, “I have started learning English since I was in the fourth grade of Primary School. It was one of core subjects in my school.”

Furthermore, other foreign languages were also learned for academic purposes. For instance, Tono reported, “My dream was to continue my study in Belgium, in which three languages are spoken there; those are Dutch, French, and German. That is why I have learnt [these three languages].” Similarly, Yuyus reflected, “I got a scholarship to continue my master’s degree in Russia. The problem is the medium of instruction is Russian. So, I had to join language training for one year in Russia.” Another informant, Dila, also stated, “I got a lot of exposure to Arabic when I was a junior student of Islamic boarding school. Arabic is not only a core subject but also a medium of daily communication in pesantren [Islamic school in Indonesia].”

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study concerning the motivations of the Indonesian polyglots in learning many foreign languages is important to be discussed academically. In this section, the findings of the motivations of Indonesian polyglots for learning many languages that emerged from data analysis were interpreted by the researchers. Moreover, this discussion would confirm the findings with the previous studies and theories.

Learning a foreign language for pleasure has become the focus of several scholars. For example, this finding was in line with what Giles (2016) found in the research of motivation of non-Irish learning Irish in North America. It reported that their motive for learning the Irish language was just their hobby. Likewise, a Hungarian polyglot who mastered 17 languages, Lamb, acquired many languages through employing her hobby of reading novels (Krashen & Kiss, 1996).

Another motivation which encouraged polyglots to learn foreign languages was for the sake of social interaction. In other words, the motivation of informants to learn foreign languages was to get close to people who knew a different language in new language environments. Having an intimate social interaction with the target language environment would get a better chance of acquiring the language (Van Tubergen & Wierenga, 2011), including travelling and staying abroad for study purposes. This finding was in line with previous studies; for example, Gu (2011) found in the research conducted at one university where students in Hong Kong were learning multiple languages. Their reason for learning new languages was to interact more closely with the people using the target group language. This is also part of acculturation in which two groups mingling have a different language in a certain society (Schumann, 1986). This case is common in acculturation by learning a new language. Furthermore, the research conducted by Moore (2010) was also consistent with this case. The study revealed how Chinese immigrants in Canada acquired French and English since both languages are the official languages there. Meaning, learning new languages was also used for social interaction there; however, they spoke Chinese at home with their parents to maintain their identity.

Professional purposes also motivated Indonesian polyglots to learn several foreign languages. The finding in this study was relevant with what Marten and Mostert (2012) found in their research where one motivation to learn Zulu as an additional language in the United Kingdom was for professional purposes. Furthermore, Bateman and Oliveira (2014) found the main motivation of Spanish-speaking students in learning Portuguese was that the language would support their career. In another relevant study, similarly, Pratt et al. (2009) who conducted their research in all high schools in racially diverse urban west Texas, reported the motivation to learn Spanish as a foreign language was for career benefits in the future.

The last result about the motivations of the Indonesian polyglots in learning several foreign languages was for academic purposes. The study revealed every informant was motivated to learn a foreign language due to a mandatory course in any school in Indonesia. Based on the education curriculum of Indonesia, foreign languages are taught from junior high school through senior high school. In fact, foreign languages are also often taught as part of a subject in primary school, but this factor depends on school policy. On the other hand, in the schools affiliated with the ministry of religion, both English and Arabic are the compulsory subjects. Meanwhile, the higher education institutions have their autonomy of curriculum policy in which they may implement any foreign languages as a course.

Teaching a foreign language as a subject has a positive effect on students' learning motivation, at least as far as it encourages them to pass the exam. For example, Chen (2017) conducted research in which Taiwanese senior high school students were respondents. It was found that the examination period could encourage students to learn English. Also, some of the informants experienced a foreign language as a medium of instruction. It happened not only to informants who studied abroad (Kinginger, 2011; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004), but also to those who did their education in Indonesia, in particular, the informant who had an English educational background. A foreign language for an academic purpose was a common issue for Indonesian students, especially to those who wanted to study abroad. They might experience difficulty due to foreign language ability, as Mukminin (2012) found in his study where Indonesian graduate students in the US higher education system encountered language problems in their first term. Furthermore, in an Indonesia context and in response to the importance of foreign language, the government of Indonesia implemented English as a medium of instruction at schools labelled international. One of the motives behind this language policy was to motivate either students or teachers to get used to English as a mean of international communication in the field of education. Unfortunately, this policy failed due to teachers' and students' readiness in terms of foreign language skills (Haryanto & Mukminin,

2012). Finally, this language policy was stopped due to complicated curriculum problems in an international standard school.

The results of the current study revealed a variety of participants' motivations to learn many foreign languages. The study showed they might have a different motivation for each language they were learning. This study also informed the researchers that none of the participants have one motive in learning many languages; instead, there are many motivations behind acquiring many foreign languages. Also, the study revealed every single foreign language they were learning could have more than one motivation.

We found four forms of the motivations participants have for learning several foreign languages. First, the motive of the participants to learn foreign languages was pleasure. Cultural interested also motivated them to learn foreign languages; in particular, the informants enjoyed foreign movies and novels. Second, they learned foreign languages in order to build good relationships with foreigners. Moreover, some of the informants lived abroad for a long period of time; learning the local language there was one of the ways to mingle with the local people intimately. In other words, a sense of belonging would emerge during the acculturation period. Third, the polyglots' motivation for learning foreign languages was to support their career. The mastery of the languages was influenced by their past, present, or future job professions. Finally, the motivation of the Indonesian polyglots in learning foreign languages was for academic orientation. Foreign languages were a core course in an educational institution, even some of them experienced that foreign languages were a medium of instruction at their universities.

Findings in this study contribute to our understanding of polyglots' motivation in learning many foreign languages. It is hoped that any language learners adopt or adapt the motivations from the participants of this study and succeed in learning many foreign languages. Teachers, educators, and policy makers are in a position to think, choose, design interesting language activities (e.g., teaching materials and syllabi), and create or adopt suitable methodologies for language education that maintains students' motivations for learning foreign languages.

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