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# Empowering Indonesian students' regulation of feelings and attitudes in EFL learning through action-oriented reflections

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Indonesian students' regulation of feelings and attitudes in EFL learning. It considers one research question i.e. to what extent can Indonesian students regulate their feelings and attitudes in EFL learning? To answer the question, classroom action research was adopted. The participants of the research were 24 first semester students of a Primary School Teacher Education Study Program at a university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The study lasted for six months where students submitted five reflections and completed a pre- and post-participation questionnaire. Results from data analyses indicated that the students had negative feelings and attitudes towards English before participating in the action research but showed more positive feelings and attitudes as a result of their participation. They also demonstrated increased ability to regulate their feelings and attitudes towards learning English, independently of the teacher's supervision. This was attributable to: (1) the teachers' and students' mutual awareness of the importance of identifying and regulating students' feelings and attitudes in EFL learning; and (2) the students' focus on self-regulated learning strategies rather than academic achievements. This study offers pedagogical implications for EFL/ESL teachers and suggestions for future researchers.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 April 2018

Accepted 14 August 2020

## KEYWORDS

Feelings; attitudes; EFL; self-regulated learning; action research

## Students' feelings in EFL/ESL learning<sup>1</sup>

Students' feelings<sup>2</sup> in education and EFL/ESL learning have traditionally gained little attention from educational researchers and teachers; they have often been viewed rather negatively although their impacts on learning and academic performance are apparent (Afzal and Robinson 2011; Ferris and Gerber 1996; Meyer and Turner 2006; Winans 2012). However, an increasing number of studies on students' emotions in EFL/ESL learning have been conducted in the past few years, and they generally demonstrate a positive relationship between students' feelings, learning engagement, and learning outcomes. They also argue that more research on teaching strategies should be undertaken to reduce students' negative feelings and enhance their learning.

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Research Interests: Self-regulated learning, metacognition, affective domains, EFL learning and teacher professional development

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A study by Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004) in Chinese universities confirmed the impact of feelings on EFL students' learning success, with unsuccessful students shown as lacking supportive teachers and therefore finding learning a frustrating endeavour. This study suggested that more efforts should be made by teachers to support students to be persistent and motivated in learning English. Another study on undergraduate Vietnamese students (Trang, Baldauf, and Moni 2013) found that students became anxious due to changes in their feelings about EFL learning; it suggested explicit strategies to be used by teachers to address students' negative emotions about EFL learning and to provide more freedom for students to make decisions about their learning. Similarly, Alrabai's (2014) quasi-experimental study on Arabic learners of English found that the use of teacher strategies to reduce anxiety led to significantly decreased levels of anxiety for learners in the experimental group compared to those in the control group. This study, among others, claimed that teachers need to equip themselves with conscious strategies to reduce learners' anxiety in EFL learning. All three studies show that learning English as a foreign language involves students' emotions and that more research on their impact on students' learning is needed.

Several studies underscore the teacher's influence on students' emotions. A study of EFL learning at a Mexican university (Lopez 2011) demonstrated that the teacher played a crucial role in forming students' emotional reactions. Meanwhile, Beseghi (2018) revealed that students' emotions were influenced by their previous learning experiences, but, with teachers' counselling, they could develop more positive emotions towards learning a foreign language. Similarly, research at the university level in Australia (Ross 2015) argued for more research on how teachers could assist students to increase their awareness of their emotions, after finding these formed an important element in their English language learning experience. It also called for more research on how these emotions could be regulated in classroom learning contexts in order to benefit students' language learning. These studies called for further investigation into teachers' strategies for addressing students' emotions and the impacts of emotions in academic learning contexts.

### **Students' attitudes in EFL learning**

An increasing number of studies on various aspects of EFL/ESL learners' attitudes towards English language learning have been conducted in the past thirty years. Most of these used quantitative, qualitative or mixed method-research approaches to investigate EFL/ESL learners' attitudes and they may need to be enriched with action research approaches.

Four of these studies warrant further discussion since they stressed the need for EFL/ESL teachers to explicitly address students' attitudes and devise strategies to help them eliminate negative perceptions and foster positive attitudes. Gomez and Perez (2015) implemented a case study of students learning English as a foreign language in two high schools in Chile and discovered that, while the students generally liked English as a global language, this did not automatically lead to them making a commitment to learning it at school. This study suggests that students' attitudes need to be nurtured at the school and classroom level, and this is mostly determined by the teachers' teaching strategies.



The second study (Zhao 2015) involved students studying English in a Mongolian university. It found that the students already showed positive attitudes towards English and suggested that English teachers should make an effort to create a favourable learning atmosphere in the classroom and choose teaching methods that could help nurture students' positive attitudes. This study supported Gomez and Perez (2015) view that students' attitudes, both positive and negative, may be related to the teaching strategies used inside the classroom.

A descriptive and statistical study was conducted at universities in Tehran, Iran (Genc, Kulusakli, and Aydin 2016) involving EFL students from various departments. This found that students studying via distance learning demonstrated more positive attitudes towards EFL learning than those studying in traditional classrooms. This study recommended further research on teacher strategies to help students improve their motivation and eliminate their negative attitudes in EFL learning. However, the fourth study (Buyukkarci 2016) revealed that having positive attitudes did not necessarily enhance students' willingness to engage in English language learning, and this may be influenced by repeated failures and unpleasant experiences with past English teachers.

Many of the authors discussed above suggest that finding appropriate strategies to help students regulate their feelings and attitudes in EFL/ESL learning should be one of the teachers' main responsibilities. In line with these, Al-Saraj (2014) stresses that the demanding nature of foreign language learning requires students to develop an ability to regulate their feelings and attitudes, as disregarding them may increase students' anxiety level and lead to academic failures. Yet, as the above review suggests, there has been little progress on studies about teacher and students' strategies to regulate students' feelings and attitudes in EFL/ESL learning and the impacts of these strategies on students' emotions, attitudes and learning progress.

### **Self-regulated learning**

One way to address students' feelings and attitudes in EFL learning is through the development of self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies. Over the past thirty years, there has been a rapid growth in research on self-regulated learning and its applications in classroom learning. SRL is generally related to students' active construction of their thoughts, feelings and actions towards learning goal attainments (Zimmerman 1986, 2000, 2013). It requires students to use internal resources to control their own learning, set learning goals, and develop appropriate strategies, motivation, and efforts to attain their goals (Boekaerts 1997; Zimmerman 2013). SRL combines learning behaviours, motivation and metacognition (Zimmerman 1994; Zimmerman and Bandura 1994) and impacts students' learning and motivation (Boekaerts and Corno 2005). It has often been used interchangeably with metacognition, particularly when the focus of the learning is on the learners' awareness of the internal learning resources (see Boekaerts, Pintrich, and Zeidner 2000). Paris and Paris (2001) urged teachers to provide learning resources for students to enable them to develop strategies, motivation and independence. To acquire these essential skills, students need their teachers' deep understanding of SRL and their support (Rao and Torres 2016; Saariaho et al. 2016; Vu and Shah 2016), and this need can be met in the context of action research-oriented teaching. Without the autonomy,

freedom and responsibility to regulate their emotions, attitudes and EFL learning, students' learning may not progress as desired. It was within this context that this action research was conducted.

An action research approach is arguably more beneficial to both teachers and students than other research methodologies since action research sees learners as active and reflective participants as well as collaborators in the research, who contribute significantly to the research procedure and results (see Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Mills 2000). In this study, the researcher worked with the participants to identify strategies to regulate their emotions and attitudes in EFL/ESL learning, enabling them to maximise their learning potential. Although this action research was carried out in 2010 and reported in 2013 (see Mbato 2013), it has the potential to contribute to current discussions and knowledge about teachers' strategies to facilitate students' regulation of emotions and attitudes in EFL/ESL learning.

In the Indonesian learning context, students' emotions and attitudes are often ignored by the teachers partly because of the Indonesian students' total obedience to the teachers and the teachers' total obedience to the curriculum (cf. Indah 2017; Indah and Kusuma 2016; Lamb 2004; Lengkanawati 2004; Marcellino 2008; Rachmajanti 2017). As a result, this action research focused on one research question: To what extent can Indonesian students regulate their feelings and attitudes in EFL learning? It was expected that this study would enrich, extend and partly fill the gap in the current literature and discussion about students' regulation of their feelings and attitudes in EFL/ESL learning.

## Methodology

### *Why action research?*

To facilitate students in regulating their feelings and attitudes in learning English, I adopted classroom action research. Unlike traditional research, which may focus mainly on researching about people and gaining data from research subjects (e.g. Buyukkarci 2016; Genc, Kulusakli, and Aydin 2016; Gomez and Perez 2015; Mbato & Kharismawan, 2018), action research not only studies about people but also studies with people (see, e.g. Brydon-Miller 2018; Call-Cummings 2017; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Yan 2016).

Through participatory action research (Call-Cummings 2017) students will have room to empower themselves in the learning process in the pursuit of knowledge. In the context of EFL/ESL learning where students face the emotional burden of having to speak in a language they are not familiar with or have not mastered (Dewaele 2005; Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986; Ross 2015; Trang, Baldauf, and Moni 2013; Ustuk & Aydin, 2016), action research becomes a powerful method to adopt by teachers. Through action research, students have more space to voice their learning experiences and concerns rather than having to depend on their teachers as the sole regulator of their learning, as has been the case in several EFL/ESL learning contexts (Chaffee, Noels, and McEown 2014; Lamb 2004, 2012, 2013; Marcellino 2008).

In the Indonesian educational context, classroom action research has been promoted in the past decade as a strategic way to empower teachers in teaching (Pirdaus 2011). In action research, learners are expected to have more power and control over their own

learning with the teacher acting more as a facilitator. This way they can develop critical thinking skills in relation to their learning progress and outcome. However, as Pramswari (2016) acknowledged, few teachers have engaged in action research, preferring instead to follow pre-planned learning designs, and allow less freedom and autonomy for students to explore their learning. This means there is limited room for students to be critical learners and express their feelings and attitudes (cf. Indah and Kusuma 2016; Indah 2017; Marcellino 2008; Rachmajanti 2017).

### **Research context and participants**

This research was carried out at the Primary School Teacher Education Study Programme at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, from July-December 2010. Action research is most compatible with the *Ignatian Pedagogy* of Sanata Dharma University which emphasises the holistic transformation of students' learning experiences, spiritually, intellectually, affectively or behaviourally, and which in turn prompts them to take action (The International Commission of the Apostolate of the Jesuit Education, cited in Chubbuck 2007, 242). The university promotes academic excellence and humanistic values and prepares young people to be critical and professional through dialogue and reflection (Humas 2012). Dialogues and reflections are conducted every semester, and students have the opportunity and freedom to discuss their learning experiences with their academic advisors during the semester.

The spirit of dialogue and reflection resonates well with action research. Townsend (2013) argues that dialogue should be at the heart of any participatory action research as it opens the way for fruitful participation. The culture of dialogue reduces the teachers' power and control over students; it enables the students and teachers to treat one another as partners in learning rather than as the powerless and the powerful.

In Sanata Dharma University, teachers are expected to act as facilitators rather than merely as instructors. *Ignatian Pedagogy* has three core values, i.e. competence, conscience and compassion, which could be explored through experience, reflection, action, and evaluation as required in the learning context (Cheney Cheney, 2003c). The culture of dialogue in Sanata Dharma University also helps create trust between teachers and students. Through dialogue, students could discuss with their teachers the learning materials they are using, or want to use to achieve the learning objectives, and what learning strategies are best for them. Equally, teachers can delegate some learning responsibility to the students, including the autonomy to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning and progress. Most importantly, dialogue culture empowers students to provide feedback on the teaching and learning processes without feeling intimidated. In the context of this action research, this trust relationship was expected to increase the trustworthiness of the data, particularly the students' data about the researcher.

This action research involved 24 out of 144 first semester students enrolled in the Intensive Reading 1 class of the academic year of 2010–2011 and five English lecturers, including the researcher. It was ethically approved by the Southern Cross University Ethics Committee (approval number ECN-10-110) and informed consent was gained from the students before its implementation. The students' participation was voluntary, and their identities were kept confidential and anonymous. All the students were training to be Primary School teachers and had studied English compulsorily for at least six years prior to



their enrolment in the study program. However, English competence was not a requirement to be a primary school teacher. The data discussed here was gathered from the 24 students who were enrolled in my class and directly involved in the research. The remaining students were taught by my four colleagues, and I did not have authority to make use of their data. However, information about all the students ( $N = 144$ ) was shared in the teachers' regular fortnightly meetings (see Appendix 1: Lesson Plan) and used by individual teachers to enrich their respective class learning.

## **Procedures**

This study consisted of five major action research cycles (from July-December 2010) in accordance with the students' submissions of five reflections. Each cycle lasted between two to three weeks. The research focused primarily on increasing the teacher's and the students' awareness of the importance of identifying and regulating students' feelings and attitudes in EFL learning, and on the students' ability to develop self-regulated learning strategies. During the five cycles, the students reflected on their self-regulation of the certain factors and strategies in learning English; these were a) feelings, b) attitudes, c) support, d) motivation, e) volition, f) self-efficacy, g) attribution, and h) reading strategies. Each of these elements was introduced to the students in separate weeks and became the focus of their weekly reflections and the researcher's oral and written feedback.

The learning materials inside the class focused mostly on reading as this was required by the curriculum. However, outside the class, the students were allowed to pursue English learning and learning strategies in accordance with their interests, needs and wants. They were also asked to focus on regulating specific elements, as listed in the lesson plan (see Appendix 1: Lesson Plan). The students' reflections took place both inside and outside of the classroom where they learnt English without the teacher's presence. Independent learning outside the classroom was based on students' individual learning plans, which were mostly drawn up at the end of class meetings and resulted from consultations with the teacher as well as from students' previous reflections.

Feelings were taught and reflected on in Cycle 3, Week 5, 6 and 7 and attitudes in Cycle 1, Week 1, 2, and 7. Other cycles focused on other elements of self-regulation, which were beyond the scope of this article. In practice, students were encouraged to reflect and plan actions to undertake any elements of self-regulation in accordance with their individual needs. In implementing action research, I followed Burns (2010) and Phelps (2002), who suggested that action research cycles were more fluid than traditionally suggested by Kemmis and McTaggart (1998). For the detailed information about the research cycles and activities, see Lesson Plan (Appendix 1).

During the teaching learning process, I was involved in the planning, acting, observing and reflections of the implementation of the elements of self-regulation in the classroom. To facilitate students' understanding of the elements of self-regulation and metacognition, I, together with my colleagues, provided a metacognitive booklet, which was distributed to students at the beginning of the semester. In addition, since making learning plans and reflections were not part of the students' prior education practices in Indonesia, we supported them in making attainable weekly learning plans and reflections through oral and written feedback.

Another major shift in learning, which was implemented in this action research, was the creation of a community of English learning on campus, an idea which received an enthusiastic response from the students. I saw this as important as their learning was not likely to progress significantly without a supportive learning environment outside the classroom. This community was imperative in the context of EFL learning, since there was very little English use outside the formal setting, and, as Townsend (2013) argues, creating a community of learners should be one characteristic of participatory research.

Learning outside the classroom gives students more freedom and choices to experiment and to exercise their ideals about learning. It also reduces the teachers' control and power. Townsend (2013) argues that in participatory action research, the researchers need to deal with control and power issues in order to enable learners to maximise their learning potential. Through this action research, the students had more power and control in learning since the focus had shifted from teaching to learning. The students displayed their work on boards weekly outside the classroom around the Study Programme's vicinity. The tasks were related to students' interests and themes discussed in class, which were chosen by the group members and were completed in small groups. Students would regularly visit the displays and write some comments about them; they then discussed their comments with other groups in class. These activities were done at the beginning of the class and lasted for about 15 minutes. This way, students were involved in the knowledge construction (see Townsend 2013), particularly in addressing and regulating their feelings and attitudes in EFL/ESL learning.

My role as a teacher in terms of the learning strategies undertaken by the students was mostly limited to laying out learning plans in class (see Appendix 1) and suggesting general learning strategies outside the class, including regulation of their feelings and attitudes. At times, I would suggest certain strategies students could implement outside the classroom, such as watching English TV programmes and forming English speaking groups. However, most of the time, students were encouraged to participate in inventing and trying out their own learning strategies. The participatory elements of this research were found in their autonomy, responsibility and the freedom to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning strategies and affective elements, particularly outside the classroom. They were also reflected in the learning activities in class when students brought their English learning experiences outside back into the classroom and discussed them with the teacher and the other students. Making reflections and individual learning plans based on the learning experiences in class, as explained above, further demonstrated the participatory nature of this research (see Lesson Plan, Appendix 1).

### ***Data collection methods and analysis***

Qualitative data were collected through the five reflective journals students submitted and quantitative data through a pre-semester and post-semester survey. The journals were used as a medium for students to plan, monitor and evaluate their feelings and attitudes in learning English as a foreign language. Quantitative data were collected at the beginning and end of the semester using the same questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of nine questions about feelings and eight questions about attitudes using a 7-point Likert scale. These questions were all adapted from Phelps (2002) and checked with

other English teachers for face and content validity before use. The aim of the questionnaire was to compare students' feelings and attitudes at the beginning and end of the semester and to help them reflect on these points throughout the semester.

I employed thematic and iterative data analysis of the qualitative data aiming to find emergent, common, and contradictory themes and issues in the students' reflective journals (see Dey 1993; Gibson and Brown 2009). In reporting the findings, I focused on major themes and the changes in students' feelings and attitudes revealed in the data rather than exclusively on the actions, interventions, and changes that occurred in each cycle (cf. Burns 2010; Phelps 2002). Accordingly, the findings were not restricted to individual cycles per se. This was also due in part to the position I adopted in this research, which was more of a facilitator than an instructor. Assuming this role allowed the students to develop self-regulated learning habits since most learning in Indonesian classrooms is prescribed by the teachers. My interventions came mostly in the form of oral and written feedback on students' weekly progress reports and submitted reflections, and on the issues emerging in the class discussions and sharing.

Using SPSS 17 (SPSS, 2008), I employed descriptive and inferential statistics to the quantitative data. Options 1–3 (strongly disagree to somewhat disagree) and 5–7 (somewhat agree to strongly agree) were collapsed to *Disagree* and *Agree* respectively for the sake of data analysis. However, where required by the data, a certain response such as *Strongly Disagree* or *Strongly Agree* was addressed separately. Descriptive statistics focused on the percentage of students' responses before and after their participation in the research. Non-parametric tests, i.e. the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests (cf. Argyris and Schon 1996; Manning and Munro 2007) were used to compare median responses to the students' feelings and attitudes on the pre-semester and post-semester questionnaire.

### ***Validity and social desirability bias in this research***

To increase the validity of the data and to reduce social bias in this research, I acted more as a facilitator of the students' learning than as an instructor. This was implemented through my adoption of Herr and Anderson's (2005) five criteria of validity in action research: democratic validity; outcome validity; process validity; catalytic validity; and dialogic validity. Democratic validity was achieved through my collaboration with student participants in addressing their feelings and attitudes in learning English where there was a minimal power imbalance in learning. Outcome validity allowed me to collaborate with the participants in refining actions in order for the students to become more able to regulate their feelings and attitudes in EFL learning. Process validity enabled the students and the teacher researcher to focus on the process of learning, such as in the planning and reflections on their learning, feelings and attitudes. Through catalytic validity, the students and the teacher found room to challenge existing views of learning, which, in the Indonesian educational context, were mostly centred on the teacher, and moved to the actions to help students to regulate their feelings and attitudes in learning. Dialogic validity enabled a critical dialog between the researcher and the students, particularly through written and oral feedback to students' written reflections. Rich data about their change of feelings and attitudes as well as their active engagement in learning English, mostly independent of the teacher's intervention, strengthened the validity of the students' claims.

To address social desirability bias in this research, I took the following actions (following Miles and Huberman 1994): 1) staying at the field for six months acting more as a facilitator rather than an instructor; 2) being less intrusive, particularly when students were engaged in the process of regulating their feelings and attitudes in EFL learning; 3) making it clear to the students that their success in my class depended mostly on their own learning commitments and that I would be there to support them rather than to solve their learning difficulties; 4) using rich data from students' five reflections and questionnaires for triangulation; and 5) playing a reserved role so that students could develop the confidence and freedom in their ability to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. The students also had the freedom to make reflections about and plan actions for their learning and achievements. There were no leading questions from the researcher that might direct their reflections to meet the expectations of the researcher.

## Results

### *Students' reflective journals*

Engaging with students through their reflective journals, I found the six most important themes across this group were 1) teachers' influence, 2) perceptions of task difficulty, 3) the inability to identify the cause of negative feelings and attitudes, 4) perceived usefulness of English, 5) unrealistic perceptions of their own English language capacity and performance, and 6) seeking the enjoyment and nurturing success in learning English.

The first theme to emerge from students' reflections was a lack of inspiration from past teachers, which impacted negatively on their feelings and attitudes to English learning. In their reflections, some students mentioned that their past teachers made them dislike English and unenthusiastic about learning it. For example, S03 (Refl.1) wrote:

Since the first time I learned English I didn't like it as I found it difficult to understand. This is because my former English teachers, be it at Junior or Senior High school, did not explain it very well. This made me lazy (*unmotivated*) to study English. (*Translated by the author*).<sup>3</sup>

However, using the current teacher as a role model, S03 learned to regulate her feelings and attitudes towards English by learning more vocabulary as her learning goal. A number of other students recognised that they had managed to eliminate negative feelings and attitudes towards English language with the teacher's support and the learning strategies taught:

What I felt during the last (*previous*) learning English language, at first I was scared because of my ability in the English language is very weak (*weak*). But with the fun teacher who ultimately supported fear gradually disappeared and I became eager to learn English (S13/Refl.1). (*Additional information in brackets by the author*).

Before I study English, I feel afraid because I do not like English. I think English is difficult, and I can't speak English well. After I met with my lecturer, I don't feel afraid again. I think he has a new strategy and good teach English. Start now, I will study English diligently, because I know English is important and I want to speak English well (S16/Refl.1).

Perceptions of task difficulty caused some students' negative feelings and dislike of English:



Since the first time I began to study it at school, I don't really like English. Actually initially I kind of liked it, but as it became harder and harder, then I didn't like it. I actually tried but there was not any progress. (S07/Refl.1)

However, through their subsequent reflections, many students indicated that being more aware of the negative impact of their feelings and attitudes towards English encouraged them to change these attitudes, and this greatly benefited their learning.

Some students were unable or unwilling to explicitly identify a cause or causes for their negative feelings and attitudes towards English. Demonstrating strong statements about her negative feeling and attitude, S08 (Refl.1), for example, wrote:

Since studying it for the first time, I disliked English. It was really boring, irritating, made me nervous. The bottom line is that learning English is something I dislike so much. I did not have time to study English outside school hours because I already disliked it. *(Translated by the author).*

Inability to explicitly write about the influences on her feelings did not stop her from learning to regulate her feelings and attitudes, and her motivation to learn English did increase by Meeting 2 as reflected in learning goals:

My goals: Learn well so that I can get good grades. Being a good teacher. At the end of the semester I want to be able to speak English correctly and appropriately. *(Translated by the author).*

As demonstrated by this student, extreme negative feelings and attitudes towards English could be eliminated once students were assisted to reflect on the future benefits of English.

Having unrealistic perceptions of their own capacity and performance (i.e. low self-efficacy) could also affect students' feelings about their English language learning capacity and lead to fear. S01(Refl.3), for example, was unhappy about his English, stating that he had not improved much despite being one of the most diligent and creative students in class. Another student (S02/Refl.2) did not know why she was afraid to speak in English although she liked it. Being assisted to regulate her feelings and attitudes, she was able to seek ways to avoid distractions, focus on her learning goals and regulate an environment for learning:

Today I try to write in English. I make a poetry to decorate my room. Although it just for fun. But it's very important in my English development. I start to fill my room with English word. I try to create English atmosphere in my room so that I habitual with English (S02/Refl.3).

This student, and others, was becoming more able to regulate her feelings and attitude by setting individual goals, putting more effort into pursuing them, monitoring and evaluating her learning in order achieve the learning success.

Rather than dwelling on the negative feelings and attitudes, many students learned to seek the enjoyment and nurture success in learning English. S02 learned to identify more enjoyable ways to enhance positive feelings and attitudes in learning English (Refl.3). S06 (Refl.5) focused on gaining the enjoyment from an English Speaking Club set up by the Study Programme:



I believe the activity will be fun (*before she came to class*) and I right, I laugh during activity", and "today I follow English club. English club always funny (*'lucu' translates as interesting/funny and has a positive connotation; a more appropriate English word would be 'fun'*) and I can refresh my brain after study hard for a week. (*Additional information in brackets and translation by the author*).

Supporting students to learn English through enjoyable activities impacted profoundly on their feelings, attitudes and motivation in learning. Many students chose to learn English through songs and films outside the class after being encouraged to adopt these media to improve their English. S18 (Refl.2), for example, wrote:

Today I feel happy to study English because I and my friends sing a song together ... My lecturer has a new strategy in this lesson, and I think his strategy is good. Music help student to enjoy the lesson and I think my friends enjoy too.

Others included searching for English songs on the Internet, listening to them and writing out the lyrics in their subsequent learning plans. Student 06 (Refl.5) mentioned watching the *Ice Age 2* movie twice without the Indonesian subtitles and enjoying learning through English songs:

... because I like music, I will be listening (*to*) music with English lyric(s). Even thought (*though*) the song is fast, I am not boring (*bored*) with this song. (*Additional information in brackets by the author*).

Similarly, S22 (Refl.5) stated that she liked to listen to English songs and downloaded songs to her mobile phone, and watched films more than speaking. S23 (Refl.3) also reflected on the many vocabulary words she gained from English films and songs.

Students' negative feelings and attitudes also diminished when they learned to focus on learning success rather than failures. Experiencing a positive change in her feelings towards English in Week 4, S17 (Refl.2) wrote 'I feel happy because I can speak English (*walaupun sedikit/although a little*)'. Similarly, while attending class in Week 6, S03 (Refl.3) acknowledged feeling happy because she could follow the lesson. Reflecting on the class in Week 10, S13 (Refl.4) wrote, 'Today I enjoying learn English, I not nervous, I feel happy in learn English because I can understand reading English today.' As her subsequent reflections indicated, her positive feelings also led her to set further goals: "I will trying love English so that I can learn English very well. And I will develop my capability in English, until my ability in English to increase". The important relationship between students' understanding of the learning task and their feelings is further demonstrated in S14's reflection (Refl.2):

In the first time I feel boring (*bored*). But in pertengahan (*in the middle*) I can understand. I am to can know about the Beattles. So *mata kuliah* in today is very happy, because I am *sedikit* understand *tentang mata kuliah* in today (*So I was happy in today's lecture because I could understand it a little bit*). (*Additional information in brackets and translation by the author*).

These experiences showed how the students' feelings and attitudes were positively impacted as they realised they could gain success through self-regulating their feelings and attitudes, as demonstrated by the following students:

Everyone has feelings. Good feelings, bad feelings. My feelings is good. Maybe because every I think something its true (*maybe every time I think about something, it comes true*) (S06/Refl.3).

I feel more good in my attitude in English. If before I don't like write in English, now I like write in English. I often read the English text and I like watching film in English. (S06/Refl.5).

Now, I feel my attitude is enough good than before. Before, I didn't like English, especially listening. But now I often listen song in English and I like to sing. Sing a song in English is help me to learn about listening and speaking (S18/Refl.5). (*Additional information in brackets by the author*).

The reflective journals demonstrated that the students' ability to regulate their feelings and attitudes in learning English increased; however, only a few students commented that the teacher became an important factor in their positive change. Thus, there was no excessive data reporting about the teacher researcher's role in this research.

### ***The Pre-semester and post-semester questionnaire***

Students' questionnaire responses showed a sharp increase in their reported feelings and attitudes towards English following their participation in the research (See [Tables 1 and 2](#))<sup>4</sup>

Students' feelings towards English on all nine questions indicated an improvement (see [Table 1](#)). Questions F1-F5 and F9, which relate to students' general feelings about learning English, showed an increase in the proportion of students who agreed with the statements by between 41% and 54%. Feeling confident about one's ability to do well in English (Question F1) recorded the highest increase (54%) and having the personality to do well in English (Question F2) the lowest increase (41%).

Statements F6-F8 asked about the students' feelings towards specific English skills. Feeling comfortable *listening* to English indicated the most significant changes (74% more students agreed with this statement post-semester) while 47% more students agreed they felt comfortable *speaking* English post-semester. *Reading* in English showed a less pronounced change (38% more students agreed). Students' responses to the attitudinal questions also indicated positive changes, as shown in [Table 2](#). The number of students who agreed with the positive statements about general attitudes to English indicated

**Table 1.** Students' Feelings towards English.

Statement No.	Statements	Pre-Semester			Post-Semester		
		Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
F1	I am confident about my ability to do well in English	25%	45%	30%	8%	8%	84%
F2	I am the type to do well in English	13%	49%	38%	4%	17%	79%
F3	The thought of learning English is not frightening	29%	37%	34%	-	8%	92%
F4	I am not worried about making mistakes when learning English	42%	25%	33%	4%	8%	88%
F5	I feel comfortable about my ability to read in English	25%	34%	41%	11%	10%	79%
F6	I feel comfortable about my ability to speak in English	50%	38%	12%	8%	33%	59%
F7	I feel comfortable to write in English	54%	21%	25%	4%	33%	73%
F8	I feel comfortable to listen in English	78%	13%	9%	4%	13%	83%
F9	Overall, I don't ever feel anxious about learning English	42%	38%	20%		33%	67%

**Table 2.** Students' Attitudes towards English.

Statement No.		Pre-Semester			Post-Semester		
		Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
A1	I like learning English	21%	21%	58%	4%	4%	92%
A2	Once I start learning English, I find it difficult to stop	54%	38%	8%	20%	20%	60%
A3	I would choose to learn English in my spare time	45%	25%	30%	4%	17%	79%
A4	I like to read an English text	50%	13%	37%	4%	21%	75%
A5	I like to watch English movies	17%	8%	75%	4%	4%	92%
A6	I like to listen to English songs	16%	12%	72%	4%	4%	92%
A7	I like to speak in English	55%	29%	16%	-	13%	87%
A8	I like to write in English	56%	26%	18%	12%	21%	67%

quite notable increases (between 34–50%). In relation to specific English skills, attitudes toward *speaking* English (A7) showed the highest increase (with 71% more students agreeing). This was followed by attitudes towards *writing* with 49% more students agreeing (A8) and *reading* with 38% more students agreeing (A4). Listening to English songs (A6) and watching English movies (A5) showed the lowest increase. Only 20% and 17% more students respectively agreed with these statements; however, it is worth noting that many students reported enjoying listening to English songs (72%) and watching English films (75%) before their participation in the course.

Students' feelings about speaking (Statement F6, Table 1) when compared to their attitudes towards speaking (Statement A7, Table 2) needs further comment. The sharp increase in the proportion of students having a positive attitude towards speaking English after their participation in the course (rising from 16% to 87%) was not followed by a similar increase in their feelings about their ability to speak English (rising from 12% to 59% of students). This might be related to Indonesian culture where expressing confidence in one's ability is often avoided as it is not considered socially acceptable. The proportion of students who could not decide whether they felt comfortable about their ability to speak English did not show a significant change (from 38% pre-semester to 33% post-semester).

A Wilcoxon signed-ranked test on students' feelings before and after the research indicated a significant improvement between pre-participation ( $Mdn = 3.61$ ), and post-participation ( $Mdn = 5.22$ ,  $z = -4.102$ ,  $p = <.05$ ). There was also a significant improvement in students' attitudes (pre-participation  $Mdn = 4.25$ ; post-participation  $Mdn = 5.31$ ,  $z = -3.602$ ,  $p = <.05$ ).

Overall, evidence from both the qualitative and quantitative data demonstrated that the students had more positive feelings and attitudes towards English after their participation in the research. They also indicated increased ability to regulate their feelings and attitudes in learning English.

## Discussion and conclusion

This research aimed to find out the extent to which Indonesian students could regulate their feelings and attitudes in EFL learning. Results from both quantitative and qualitative data analyses indicated that the students had more positive feelings and attitudes towards English after their participation in the research. They also demonstrated

increased ability to regulate their feelings and attitudes in learning English, and to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning independent of the teacher's supervision. Such increased capacity was attributable to: (1) the teacher's and the students' mutual awareness of the importance of identifying and regulating students' feelings and attitudes in EFL learning; and (2) students' focus on self-regulated learning strategies rather than learning achievements.

### ***The teachers' and students' mutual awareness of the importance of identifying and regulating students' feelings and attitudes in EFL learning***

The first significant finding in this research was the teachers' and students' mutual awareness of the importance of identifying and regulating students' feelings and attitudes in EFL learning. Learners' awareness of the importance of nurturing positive feelings and attitudes arises and develops in learning contexts where their teachers recognise and value these two entities. Therefore, supporting students to recognise, confront and regulate their negative feelings and attitudes in learning English should be one of the EFL/ESL teachers' central roles. However, this research suggests that this is not achieved by becoming the centre of the students' learning and the solution to their learning difficulties, but rather by supporting them to take the learning responsibility into their hands, including when it comes to regulating their emotions and attitudes.

Data from students' reflections and the pre-semester questionnaire indicated that most of the students held negative feelings and attitudes towards English prior to enrolling in the course. However, these began to disappear after the students engaged in deep reflections and learned to regulate them. Quantitative data analysis on students' feelings also indicated that students felt more positive towards English and English skills after their participation in the research. This finding supports previous research (e.g. Beseghi 2018; Buyukkarci 2016; Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons 2004) and extends it by demonstrating that previous negative learning experiences could be diminished when students and their teachers shared an awareness of the need to identify, reflect on and regulate these experiences. This result also strengthens existing arguments about learning being more than just a mental activity but rather involving students' emotions, cognition, and behaviour (Buyukkarci 2016; Ross 2015; Trang, Baldauf, and Moni 2013). These aspects need to be consciously nurtured at school and inside the classroom (see Gomez and Perez 2015; Zhao 2015).

### ***Learners' focus on self-regulated learning strategies rather than on academic achievements***

Qualitative data analyses indicate that the causes of students' negative feelings and attitudes varied and were not always explicable. The variability and complexity of students' feelings and attitudes may mean they require the teacher's assistance to help them focus on self-regulated learning strategies rather on academic achievements, and several studies reviewed here suggest that teachers develop a repertoire of strategies to help students to regulate their feelings and attitudes. However, in the context of participatory action research, I needed to provide students with more opportunities to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. This is crucial if the teachers wish to address the issue of



power imbalance and control in the classroom as discussed previously (see Townsend 2013). As has been indicated earlier, learners' feelings and attitudes in EFL learning may not be properly addressed unless the students have room to recognise, confront, reflect on and regulate them. Therefore, rather than devising a repertoire of strategies for students, I encouraged them to develop their own self-regulated learning strategies to help them regulate their feelings and attitudes in learning English.

The first major strategy developed by the students was to focus on learning strategies rather than on negative feelings and attitudes. Data from their reflections demonstrated their developing ability to set individual learning goals and deploy various strategies of their own choice outside the classroom learning context, and they were able to move away from their negative feelings and attitudes towards English. Being able to regulate feelings, thoughts, actions, and strategies in learning is an important requirement for students to attain academic success (see Jarvenoja, Jarvela, and Malmberg 2015; Lee et al. 2016; Ross 2015; Zimmerman 2013). It is apparent from the data that to be successful in learning English as a foreign or second language, learners need to focus on developing self-regulated learning strategies, including strategies to deal with their negative feelings and attitudes, rather than on learning achievements. Focusing on learning strategies helps them to handle their negative feelings and attitudes more easily. This way, they will find learning less anxious and can then plan, monitor and evaluate their learning.

The second important strategy was focusing on nurturing positive feelings and attitudes towards English, and seeking incremental success rather than dwelling on the negatives. Data from students' reflections suggest that their negative feelings and attitudes started to disappear once they learnt to be more positive in learning. For many students, learning English can be a very daunting task both mentally and emotionally (see, e.g. Alrabai 2014; Beseghi 2018; Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons 2004; Trang, Baldauf, and Moni 2013). Data from students' reflections revealed that many students found the subject too difficult and felt that they were not making any progress. These negative feelings and attitudes began to diminish after they focused on the enjoyment they could find in learning and on the incremental success rather than on the perceived task difficulty and unrealistic academic performance.

This finding underlines a close and complex relationship between students' feelings, attitudes, cognition, and their engagement in learning and academic success (see, e.g. Abdolrezapour, Tavakoli, and Ketabi 2017; Buyukkarci 2016; Jarvenoja, Jarvela, and Malmberg 2015; Ross 2015; Zimmerman 2013). With the teacher's support, and regular and deliberate reflections on their learning goals and experiences, the students in my study began to enjoy learning and learned to focus on the small successes they gained, which motivated them to learn more. Becoming more competent in regulating their feelings and attitudes helped many students to enjoy the learning endeavour and success. The fun and the little success they gained in learning gave them positive feelings and attitudes, which in turn bred more fun and success in learning. They also developed the capability to plan, monitor and evaluate their English language learning.

Data from this study not only corroborate existing arguments and studies about the importance of students' feelings and attitudes in EFL/ESL learning as well as their achievements (see, Alrabai 2014; Beseghi 2018; Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons 2004; Lopez 2011; Trang, Baldauf, and Moni 2013;) but also provide ample evidence of the power of action research in facilitating students' identification, reflections and

regulation of their emotions and attitudes in EFL/ESL learning. In this research, the researcher and students worked together as partners in learning, with the researcher's focus shifting from efforts to obtain data *from* students to collaborating *with* them (cf. Brydon-Miller 2018; Call-Cummings 2017; Townsend 2013; Yan 2016). Having more freedom to reflect and regulate their feelings and attitudes in EFL learning enabled students in this research to take independent actions to improve their feelings, attitudes, and learning. Many authors have argued that being able to regulate one's feelings, thoughts and actions to attain academic goals is expected to help students to enjoy learning and gain academic success. This action research provides significant evidence and therefore partly fills the gap in the literature about the power of the teacher and students' mutual awareness in addressing and regulating students' feelings and attitudes in EFL learning.

In conclusion, the current study demonstrates that students learning English as a foreign language in my class developed more capability to recognise, confront and regulate their negative feelings and attitudes towards English. Most of them came to class with negative feelings and attitudes towards English. However, they showed more positive feelings and attitudes after engaging in the study. Such capability was developed, among others, because of the increasing awareness of both the students and the teacher about the significance of students' feelings and attitudes in EFL learning, and also the students' focus on self-regulated learning strategies rather than on immediate learning outcomes. The students' ability to regulate their feelings and attitudes has greatly benefited their learning. This was made possible through action research where both the researcher and the researched benefited from their participation and contribution in the research.

## Notes

1. This derives from a doctoral thesis which is available at Southern Cross University (Mbato 2013).
2. 'Feelings', 'emotion' and 'affect' tend to be used interchangeably in the literature and therefore are not treated as different constructs in this article; cf. (Deigh 2008; Dewaele 2005; Jaber and Hammer 2015; Zimmerman 2013; Zimmerman & Kitsastas, 2014).
3. Some reflections were written in English; others have been translated from Indonesian by the author.
4. The students' responses *strongly disagree* and *disagree* (1–3 on the scale) were collapsed, as were *agree* to *strongly agree* (5–7).

## Acknowledgments

I would like express my gratitude to Dr. Renata Phelps and Dr. Robert Smith, my thesis supervisors at Southern Cross University, Australia for teaching me the skills to survive academically. My gratitude also goes to Prof. Dr. Martin Hayden, Dean of the School of Education and all the teaching staff at Southern Cross University, and Sanata Dharma University management for their support during my doctoral study. Last, I owe much to my wife and three children for their never-ending love and support.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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