



The Paradox of High Achievement: When an Outstanding EFL Student Struggled to Graduate on Time

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ABSTRACT

High-achieving students are commonly associated with strong academic performance and timely graduation. However, not all academically successful students are able to complete their studies without obstacles. This study explores the experiences of an outstanding English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teacher who struggled to graduate on time despite her remarkable academic achievements. Employing narrative inquiry, this study investigates the participant's lived experiences, focusing on the factors contributing to her delayed graduation. The findings reveal that financial difficulties, problematic academic supervision, and mental health challenges significantly influenced the participant's demotivation and prolonged study completion. These challenges also affected her motivation, social life, academic productivity, and emotional well-being. Despite these obstacles, the participant gradually regained motivation through personal support systems and self-driven strategies. This study highlights that academic achievement does not necessarily protect students from educational and psychological struggles. The findings contribute to broader discussions on student well-being, academic support, and higher education completion among high-achieving EFL students.

Keywords: delayed graduation, demotivation, EFL pre-service teachers, high-achieving students, narrative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Pre-service teacher education (henceforth PTE) is crucial because the graduate students from PTE who have been prepared adequately will influence positively to the entire system of education, including school effectiveness and students' performances. Therefore, teachers' readiness is needed. Tasdemir, Iqbal, and Asghar (2020) mentioned that the teachers who can achieve their readiness means that they achieve their professionalism. Moreover, when teachers can achieve their professionalism, it means that they can contribute to the success of educational activities. Ardiansyah (2021) investigated about pre-service teachers' perceived readiness in teaching online in international internship program. The study found that the pre-service teachers were confident since they have prepared some proper devices and some interactive methods to overcome the problems that might happen during the process of online learning. Furthermore, Rabi, Ghazali, Rohaizad, and Zulkefli (2018) found that the pre-service teachers had prepared their readiness in teaching for inclusive education program since they took part in the learning and training program at their university. Based on the previous elaborations, it is certain that the previous studies still have not explored on the other important personal aspect, especially the factors inhibiting a pre-service teacher in accomplishing the study before they become a teacher.

Previous studies have explored several factors contributing to delayed graduation among university students, including motivation, academic supervision, family background, mental health, academic pressure, and thesis-writing difficulties. Recent studies have also highlighted that demotivation, lack of academic support, and psychological challenges may negatively affect students' academic progress and study completion (Dautov, 2020; Loan, 2021). In addition, difficulties in maintaining communication with academic advisors and managing academic responsibilities may further contribute to prolonged study completion in higher education contexts.

However, most previous studies mainly focused on general student populations without specifically examining students with outstanding academic achievements. As a result, limited attention has been given to understanding why high-achieving students may also experience delayed graduation despite their strong academic performance and accomplishments. Therefore, this study focuses on a particular phenomenon involving a high-achieving EFL pre-service teacher whose educational experiences differ from those commonly represented in previous studies.

In general population, a high achiever student, which in common sense, the students with reputable and acknowledge academic achievements would accomplish the study in and/or on time. It is also supported by an investigation by Rachmawati and Fibriyani (2018) that the higher achiever students could accomplish their studies faster than the lower students. It turns out to be a big question if they failed to accomplish the study within the limit which is on the 8th semester of four years based on the Decree of Ministry of Education and Culture No.49 & year 2014 on the national standard of higher education (SNPT). This became the first important reason to find out whether any other factors which were not mentioned in the previous study, such as internal factors (motivation, intelligence, aptitude, health, etc.) and external factors (friendship, family, campus, etc.) (Winardi et.al, 2014).

The second main point is related to the research design used by the previous studies. The most common research design that is suitable with this topic is qualitative design, specifically narrative approach. The instruments of narrative approach are interview, observation, and survey. Evidently, the research that used this approach have contributed on the vital theoretical contribution on the factors inhibiting students in accomplishing the study. Moreover, those instruments are suitable to collect the valid data from many subjects participated in the research. However, if the study only involved one or two subjects, those aforementioned instruments less suitable to collect more personal information, especially if the participant has different background, personal experience, obstacles, and culture compared to general population. To accommodate this circumstance where the study only has one subject, narrative inquiry is the perfect approach. Narrative inquiry does not necessarily have to use observation and survey as the main instruments. Narrative inquiry can use narrative frame, narrative empty box and interview to collect the data. It can give the researcher a chance to gather the deeper information under several reasons and facts by comparing the personal experiences and general factors inhibiting the participant in accomplishing the study. Moreover, narrative inquiry provides three-dimension contents, such as temporality (past, present, and future in which experiences happen), place (the place in which experiences happen), and sociality (personal emotions, desires, and interaction between people) that suitable with this current study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Therefore, this study focused on exploring the factors that inhibit Nadia (pseudonym), a pre-service English teacher with reputable and acknowledged academic achievements who did not accomplish the study on 8th semester. Based on the first personal communication with her, since March 2022, Nadia has accomplished the study in her 16th semester even though she is a high achiever student on campus. It can be proven by the academic report or *Kartu Hasil*

Studi (KHS) and the certificates as well. The main aspect that distinguishes Nadia from other high achievers is the accomplishment in international level. Nadia's achievement on academic report, active participation in English community, certificates of achievement, and international experience in teaching English are the specific criteria that do not match with the criteria in general population. In English Language and Education study program, the aforementioned case above is considered as anomaly and highly unlikely for high achiever to struggle in her study. Thus, this phenomenon attracted me to investigate this phenomenon deeply based on the story by gathering and analyzing Nadia's personal experiences that can inhibit her in accomplishing the study. It can be assumed that there is a turning point of her story that triggers inhibiting factors that may only experience by Nadia. This triggering turning point may be the start of other problems which can inhibit or hinder the student in accomplishing the study. Furthermore, the aim of this study is to analyze and provide deep understanding on this particular phenomenon rather than finding the generalization of inhibiting factors that may experience by all high achiever students.

After considering the benefits of narrative inquiry and the phenomenon above, therefore, this study applied narrative inquiry to collect the data. Through exploring the factors inhibiting a high achiever student using the narrative inquiry, this study may draw out the potential issue regarding early symptoms of inhibiting factors that also happen in Nadia's case which could have been prevented. Moreover, narrative inquiry in this particular case will give the researchers an opportunity to explore about the complete and detail information from the participant's point of view. The information can start from the student's past experience, such as her bustle in college, her struggles, etc. Besides, it continues into her experiences in identifying the factors that inhibit her, such the student's problems, motivations, and efforts. Furthermore, the information can also cover her expectations on the future related to the strategy to solve the inhibitions.

Another previous study revealed that motivation, intelligence, aptitude, friendship, family, and classroom condition can be the factors causing inhibition in accomplishing the study that should be overcome by some strategies (Khofifah & Rusfandi, 2018; Abaunza, Martínez-Abad, Rodríguez-Conde, Avalos-Obregón, 2020; Falout, 2012; Han, Takkaç-Tulgar, Aybirdi, 2019; Winardi, et.al, 2014). Besides, there have been also some studies done on the factors hindering ELE students in accomplishing the study; however, most of them only focused on the students' difficulties in writing a thesis (Niken, 2022; Puspita, 2019).

Although some previous studies had investigated factors inhibiting some undergraduate students (Winardi et.al., 2014; Widarto, 2017; Putra, Nitiasih, Adil & Gunatama, 2014), little is known about the internal and external factors inhibiting an ELE high achiever student with reputable and acknowledge academic achievements as such, we may still have difficulties in assisting students with high achievements in completing their studies. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate the internal and external factors inhibiting an ELE high achiever student with reputable and acknowledge academic achievements. The explanation above, further emphasizes the research gap from previous research as the reason to conduct this study. The gap found from the previous research is the urgency to conduct the narrative inquiry research that investigated factors inhibiting a high achiever student, particularly the high achiever student is a student who achieved many accomplishments, such as the top 10 students with the highest GPA in the study program, runner up for debate competition, and got apprenticeship plus social action service overseas. Eventually, this research is expected to draw out the new insight in language teacher education regarding the factors inhibiting students in the completion of their studies can occur to some students' low level and a high achiever. This research is also expected to raise awareness to high achiever students who have difficulties in accomplishing their studies.

1.2. Research questions

To explore the phenomenon under investigation, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What factors inhibited the high-achieving EFL pre-service teacher from graduating on time?
2. How did those inhibiting factors affect the participant's academic, social, and emotional life?
3. What strategies did the participant use to overcome the inhibiting factors and regain motivation to complete the study?

1.3. Significance of the study

This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the discussion of student well-being, demotivation, and delayed graduation among high-achieving EFL students. Unlike previous studies that mainly focused on general student populations or thesis-writing difficulties, this study specifically highlights the lived experiences of a high-achieving pre-service teacher through narrative inquiry. Therefore, the study provides deeper insights into how financial problems, academic supervision, and mental health issues may also affect academically successful students.

Practically, this study is expected to raise awareness among lecturers, academic advisors, and higher education institutions regarding the importance of academic and psychological support for students, including high-achieving students who are often assumed to have fewer academic difficulties. Furthermore, the findings may help universities identify early signs of demotivation and develop more supportive academic environments to help students complete their studies on time.

METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using narrative inquiry as the research design. Narrative inquiry was selected because the study aimed to explore and understand the participant's lived experiences related to delayed graduation despite having outstanding academic achievements. Through narrative inquiry, the researcher was able to investigate the participant's personal stories, emotions, struggles, and turning points in depth. This design also allowed the researcher to explore the participant's experiences through the dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place, which are important elements in narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Therefore, narrative inquiry was considered appropriate to reveal the complexity of the participant's educational, psychological, and social experiences throughout the study completion process.

2.2. Samples/Participants

The participant of this study was purposively selected based on specific criteria relevant to the focus of the study. The participant was an EFL pre-service teacher who had remarkable academic achievements but experienced delayed graduation. The participant, referred to by the pseudonym Nadia, was a female student who had completed her study beyond the normal study period despite being recognized as a high-achieving student. She had actively participated in academic and international activities, such as debate competitions, international teaching programs, and English communities. The participant was chosen because her experiences represented a unique and uncommon phenomenon in higher education, particularly among high-achieving students.

2.3. Instruments

This study employed several instruments to collect the data, including preliminary questionnaires, open-ended questions, narrative frames, narrative empty boxes, and semi-

structured interviews. The preliminary questionnaire was adapted from previous studies to identify initial information regarding inhibiting factors experienced by the participant. Meanwhile, the open-ended questions were used to gather deeper information about the participant's personal experiences, challenges, motivations, and coping strategies.

Furthermore, narrative frames and narrative empty boxes were utilized to help the participant reconstruct and organize her experiences chronologically. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to confirm and elaborate the information obtained from the previous instruments. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to allow the participant to express her experiences more comfortably and naturally. The interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for further analysis.

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2.4. Data analysis

The data in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with repeatedly listening to the interview recordings and reading the transcripts to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's stories and experiences. After that, the interview data were transcribed and translated into English. The researcher then conducted coding by highlighting important statements related to the participant's experiences, inhibiting factors, impacts, and coping strategies.

The coding process was followed by categorizing similar codes into broader themes and interpreting the findings based on the participant's narratives. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied member checking, triangulation, and multiple field-text collections. Through thematic analysis, the researcher was able to identify significant themes regarding the causes, impacts, and strategies related to the participant's delayed graduation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

Based on the data analysis, the results will be summarized into a table. The following table describes the summary of the findings.

Table 1. Summary of the Results

Thesis Statement	Theme	Sub-RQ	Data
<i>An examination on the causes, impacts, and solutions to Nadia's demotivation reveals financial, educational, and mental health elements reason factors</i>	Causes	How would you describe your past educational experiences?	Joining some organizations and activities in the college
		How would you describe about your style in learning subjects?	Metacognitive and social strategy

	What were your most memorable achievements while studying in the college?	Winning the debate competition twice in a row, participating in International events called Lex collaborating with Singapore Poly, and joining apprenticeship plus social action service in Krabi, Thailand
	What were the factors that can inhibit you in accomplishing your study?	Financial problems, unprofessional advisor
Impacts	What were the impacts to your study?	Mental health, procrastination, demotivation
	How would you explain about your motivation to accomplish your study?	Finding the motivation back after being a wife or married
Solutions	What were your strategies to overcome your problems?	Contacting the advisors, pushing herself to write a thesis every day, asking her senior's thesis file to get inspiration

Discussion

Nadia's Demotivation Reveals Financial, Educational Issue, and Mental Health Factors

Indeed, the main factor that inhibited Nadia to accomplish the study was demotivation. Nadia's demotivation came up from three main factors, such as financial problems, educational issues, and mental health. The first inhibition factor was triggered in part of her family's financial problems since her mother said that she could not transfer the money anymore to pay her tuition fee and rent her boarding house or even buy the meal for daily life. This financial problem which was also the initial factor that inhibited her indicated that this problem potentially took a huge toll on her study. At that time, she consciously thought about how she would pay the tuition fee rather than her study. Finally, she decided to go home and help her parents to face financial problems.

This condition can change someone's priority and also personality. As she tried to help collecting some money, her focused on accomplishing the study also decreased and it was not her priority anymore. This condition where Nadia did not even think about continuing her study was a significant indicator that she suffered severe demotivation. She felt like she had to solve the family's problems first and it made her procrastinate her thesis writing. Therefore, we can conclude that financial problem was the main inhibition factor that made her start to feel demotivation.

The result of this finding supports the previous study by Norazlan et.al (2020) that having financial problems can affect students' academic performance since they have to spend their study hours working. Moreover, the study by Norazlan et.al (2020) mentioned that students whose parents could not afford to give the students necessities, such as rent, food, and academic materials will impact students' financial stress and it can lead to poor academic performance. This finding is also aligned with the study of Briones et.al (2021) that stated that

students who lack motivation would not have much inspiration. This previous study revealed that a lack of motivation can cause students to have inspiration in writing a thesis.

Additionally, the second inhibition factor was triggered by her advisors. It occurred because she thought that one of the advisors was not professional in working. The advisor always came late and skipped class for many times. Kola et.al (2015) mentioned that distraction, professional development, interpersonal relationship, and punctuality were the essential components that can determine a teacher's effectiveness. In this study, Nadia revealed that the advisor mixed up the personal issue to work in guiding the thesis writing. It aligns with Yadav and BaniAta (2013) that found that some university students feel that their teacher is a demotivator because of the teacher's personality.

Furthermore, since Nadia had been demotivation for some years when she decided to come back to her boarding house and started to write her thesis, then she faced a new problem which is depression. She preferred to isolate herself in her room to avoid her friends. She even wore a mask whenever she went out to hide from her friends. This behavior indicated that she suffered from acute anxiety and depression. This bad situation led her to procrastinate. Even though she had time to work on her thesis, she would easily lose her focus and motivation to accomplish the study. She revealed that she felt left behind and trapped.

This situation was a crucial condition since it influenced her social relationship. This problem led to Nadia losing all her friends and it made her feel lonely and more depressed. She hoped that she had someone to talk to so that she could release her feelings about the problems. This factor made her frustrated and stressed; therefore, she consciously procrastinated and her writing progress was not significant. This current study supports the statements of Briones et.al (2021) that a negative correlation was found between the level of academic procrastination and students' academic performance. Besides, it also supports the findings of Dautov (2020) that lack of interest was one of the factors of laziness. It can be proven by this study that Nadia finally postponed writing the thesis from time to time, then it made her thesis writing has been accomplished yet.

From the larger context, if we analyze all Nadia's complicated situation, her demotivation to accomplish her study seems like a normal reaction felt by Nadia. At the moment she was taught that her education was not her priority anymore, she started feeling demotivation since she faced difficulty in writing a thesis while collecting some money at the same time. Moreover, the unprofessional lecturer was the second factor that inhibited Nadia from accomplishing the study. Along with all the complicated problems, Nadia needed someone to talk to and support her in struggling with the condition. However, the lecturer was careless about her condition and was unreachable. The last, all of the complicated problems affected her mental health. She always procrastinated her thesis writing which made her left far behind her classmates who graduated foremost. All of the bad conditions influenced her personality and priority to finish her study.

The Noticeable Impacts of the Inhibition Factors

The inhibition impacted Nadia's life in some aspects, namely social habits, time management, motivation, and achievement. This impact seems to change her personality completely. We can see from Table 2 below.

Table 2. The Noticeable Impact of the Inhibition Factors

No.	Aspect	Before Inhibition	After Inhibition
1.	Social habit	An active student	An isolated student
2.	Time management	Well	Not well
3.	Achievement	Many achievements	No achievement
4.	Motivation	Highly motivated	Demotivated

From Table 2, I can elaborate that the inhibition impacted her social habit from an active student to an isolated student. Before the inhibition, she was an active student by joining some organizations, extracurricular activities, and participating in some international events. However, after the inhibition, we can see that she preferred to isolate herself in her room to avoid her friends. I can conclude that the bad experience led her to be a desperate girl trapped in a boarding house.

Moreover, some inhibition factors also changed her personality from a high achiever student into a mediocre student. We can see before the inhibition, she could manage her time well since she joined many activities, but her GPA was not less than 3.5. Furthermore, she was also one of the top 10 students who got the highest GPA among the other ELE students. However, after the inhibition, we can see that she could not manage her time well, especially when she married. In the interview section, she also revealed that she could not balance between a university student and being a housewife at the same time. In conclusion, the inhibition factor also led the high achiever student into a mediocre student.

Besides, the inhibition factors also influenced a high achiever student with many achievements into no achievement at all. Before the inhibition, we can see that she got many achievements, for instance, second place in a row in a debate competition, and the representative from the study program to join the debate competition. Moreover, she also participated in some international events, such as Lex (a collaboration event with Singapore), and had an apprenticeship and social action service in Thailand. Unfortunately, since she had the inhibition factors that have been mentioned previously, we can see that Nadia always procrastinated to do something, and finally, she could not achieve her title degree in the 8th semester. We can conclude that the inhibition factors can inhibit her from gaining the achievements successfully and satisfactorily.

Finally, all of the inhibition factors affected Nadia's motivation from a highly motivated student into demotivated student. We can see that Nadia was a well-prepared student in achieving her goals and dreams by optimizing all of the materials in the class to be learned. I can say that Nadia has been using metacognitive students to learn something. It is in line with Jabu and Asrianti (2021), Salikin, Tahir, and Emilia (2017), and Hacker (2009) that a high achiever student has been using the metacognitive strategy predominantly which focuses on awareness of how the students learn, self-evaluation, set strategies to achieve their needs or their goals. In summary, the inhibition impacted Nadia's life in some aspects, such as social habits, time management, achievement, and motivation.

Nadia's Strategies to Overcome the Inhibition Factors

Nadia took specific actions as strategies to overcome the problems she faced, for instance, seeking support from her husband, contacting the campus' Bureau of Academic Administration, and contacting her seniors to ask about their thesis to find the inspiration for her thesis writing. By using those strategies, Nadia, finally, found a way to accomplish the study. This condition could turn her motivation back to push herself to accomplish the study. Additionally, marriage can help the financial problems. Therefore, she finally decided to go back to Malang to finish her study and set a goal to finish her thesis writing within a month. At this moment, her previous depression and anxiety gradually disappeared. All the negative emotions were gone and she had a more positive attitudes toward her study.

The findings align with the study of Clark (2006) that when the students faced obstacles, they used some specific strategies to overcome the obstacles, such as finding opportunities, adapting to changes, and setting goals. This statement can be proven from the interview result that Nadia finally took the action to go back to Malang and contact the campus' Bureau of Academic Administration, and contacted the study program office to change the advisors to help her to finish the thesis writing.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, we can conclude that there are three major inhibiting factors faced by a high achieving student having a study completion problem to accomplish the study on time, such as financial problems, an unprofessional lecturer or advisor, and mental health. Those inhibition factors influenced her demotivation in finishing the study. We can see that when she felt demotivation, she procrastinated her thesis writing over and over again and it made her threaten to be dropped out. After knowing that she had only limited time to finish her study which is only one month, then, she made a crucial decision to overcome the problems which is turning the enthusiasm back in writing, especially within a month, asking her senior's draft of thesis, and asking for a help to her study program to give her one chance.

The motivation was back when she married since her husband always supported her. This situation made her take a crucial decision as the turning back to accomplish the study. From the phenomena happened, I am certain that motivation is the issue which is needed to pay attention more since it can influence the students' study accomplishment in every students' level. Moreover, from the findings, I can conclude that problems can change someone's personality because every problem happens can make influence someone's feeling. This matters to be discussed since it can make someone feel demotivation in doing something, especially accomplishing the study, not exception for student with reputable and acknowledge academic achievements. Moreover, I am certain demotivation can change someone's personality into a negative behavior since demotivation can give serious effect that needs to be aware of.

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions are proposed for higher education institutions, lecturers, and future researchers. First, universities should provide stronger academic and psychological support systems for students, including high-achieving students who are often assumed to have fewer academic difficulties. The findings of this study reveal that financial problems, unprofessional academic supervision, and mental health issues may significantly affect students' motivation and study completion. Therefore, universities are encouraged to strengthen counseling services, academic monitoring, and financial assistance programs to help students overcome their difficulties earlier.

Second, lecturers and academic advisors should maintain professional communication and provide supportive guidance during the thesis supervision process. The study showed that poor supervision and lack of support may contribute to students' demotivation and procrastination. Thus, lecturers are expected to become more responsive, empathetic, and supportive toward students' academic and emotional conditions.

Finally, future researchers are encouraged to investigate similar issues involving other high-achieving students from different educational backgrounds and contexts in order to obtain broader insights regarding factors inhibiting study completion among university students.

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