

CHANGING POLICY OF ENGLISH TEACHING APPROACH AT INDONESIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: The objective of the research is to identify the causes of secondary school students' failure to acquire English effectively. This qualitative research involves a number of students, teachers from lower and upper secondary schools, lecturers and English department students. Findings of this research reveal issues such as English teacher quality, English study program graduates quality, lack of English learning hours at school, the absence of extra-curricular activities for English exposure and English speaking environment, English national exam, the underuse and inexistence of facilities and ineffective monitoring system as the major contributors of students' English learning ineffectiveness. This study, therefore, recommends the relevant ministries to cope with these issues urgently or else this unfavorable situation will remain unchanged in future years.

Keywords: *English, teaching, learning, quality, policy, change*

PERUBAHAN KEBIJAKAN TERHADAP PENDEKATAN PENGAJARAN BAHASA INGGRIS DI SEKOLAH MENENGAH DI INDONESIA

Abstrak: Penelitian bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi hal-hal yang menyebabkan gagalnya siswa SMP dan SMA menguasai bahasa Inggris. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan melibatkan sejumlah siswa, guru bahasa Inggris SMP dan SMA, dosen, dan mahasiswa pada program pendidikan Bahasa Inggris. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan isu-isu meliputi kualitas guru bahasa Inggris, kualitas mahasiswa pada program studi bahasa Inggris, kurangnya jam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di sekolah, ketiadaan kegiatan ekstrakurikuler bahasa Inggris dan lingkungan berbahasa Inggris di sekolah, keberadaan ujian nasional, minimnya penggunaan fasilitas serta ketiadaan fasilitas tersebut, dan tidak efektifnya sistem monitoring merupakan hal-hal yang paling berkontribusi terhadap ketidakefektifan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di sekolah. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan kepada kementerian terkait untuk dapat mengatasi persoalan tersebut sesegera mungkin atau jika tidak, kondisi yang kurang menguntungkan ini akan tetap terus bertahan di masa yang akan datang.

Kata Kunci: *bahasa Inggris, mengajar, belajar, kualitas, kebijakan, perubahan*

INTRODUCTION

A lot discussions are now going on regarding the implementation of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) or Masyarakat Ekonomi ASEAN (MEA) since December 2015. Many people are questioning about the readiness of Indonesian people to compete with others from neighboring countries, particularly, with respect to their ability to communicate in English. As the still most popular international language, English remains a number one challenge for Indonesian people wishing to work for multinational companies. Thus, a policy enabling Indonesian young generations to be proficient users of English by the time they accomplish their upper secondary

school or SMA/SMK is now particularly important.

Data of English language proficiency test (TOEFL prediction test) of the SMA/SMK fresh graduates (N=1042) collected in 2015 by a language center in Indonesia show that majority of them demonstrate a poor level of English (i.e. the average score was 353). Such a score indicates that these graduates did not acquire English successfully when they were studying at lower secondary (SMP) and upper secondary level (SMA/SMK). The profile of English proficiency of these fresh graduates may be a true picture of English performance of similar graduates across the country.

The present study seeks to examine the causes of students' English learning failure despite their six years of English lesson experience. It also aims to provide recommendations for policy change. This change is necessary to effectively train English to students. There has been little information from a large scale study about what actually causes Indonesian students' failure to acquire English effectively. There is one study which inspired this research highlighting the success of English learning by Malang university English students who started their study with the TOEFL score of 412 and achieved the score of 535 at the completion of their undergraduate English education (Saukah, 2003). This success, according to Saukah, was largely due to the provision of effective intensive course at the early semester of the program. Learning from this positive research, the current study proposes an argument that a similar success is also a possibility for the graduates of secondary schools.

Saukah (2003), in his paper, proposed some strategies which should be taken to help boost the mastery of English by school students in Indonesia. First, the government should reevaluate the administration of national examination of English to students. He argues that such a test will only direct teachers to help their students achieve good scores in the test rather than helping them attain the four skills of English effectively. Second, schools need to provide frequent extra-curricular activities of English for students. Such activities can be in the form of English speaking groups or English contests. The underlying philosophy is the more time students have to practice their English, the more proficient their English will be. Third, schools need to create English speaking atmosphere.

This, for example, can be done by requiring students and staff to communicate in English inside or outside the class within certain time or day. Next, the quality of English teachers assigned to teach English at schools needs a guarantee. Thus, teacher training college should provide effective English training (e.g. through the provision intensive course focusing on the four skills of English) to their pre-service English teachers. The existing English teachers should also upgrade their competence, for instance, through their active participation in their English teaching community.

Shishavan and Sadeghi (2009) are in total agreement with Saukah with respect to the need to guarantee the quality of English teachers assigned to teach English at schools. They argue that effective learning can only take place if the class is managed by a good and qualified teacher. Thus, it is not reasonable to expect good outcomes of learning if an educational system does not place a good teacher in a school.

In the case of English teaching, a good English teacher must be a person who possesses good English proficiency and also the one who demonstrates good understanding of pedagogy (Kyriakides et al., 2002). Pedagogy, according to Lim and Chai (2007), refers to the knowledge of teaching and learning. In this regard, a good teacher is a person who knows very well how to make their learners achieve effective outcome. For instance, a teacher who often applies a teacher-centered approach is not the right person for learners who are targeted to be proficient users of English. These learners, in fact, need to be trained by the teacher who can apply learner-centered teaching approaches such as a whole language approach since this type of teaching enables them to be more independent language learners (Sadiq, 2015). In short, in learning a second or foreign language, learners should be given a lot of opportunities to practice their English particularly in the classrooms (Noora, 2008).

In his study researching the criteria of an effective language teacher, Brosh (1996) asserts that there are a few criteria that a teacher should have should he be considered an effective one. The excellent target language ability is the first thing that he should have and followed by the ability to arouse his students' language learning interest and motivation. Then, his ability to treat his students fairly is another ability that he should have. It always needs to be remembered that all students should be given an equal opportunity to learn the target language. His availability for his students is also considered an important criteria. It is a good idea to spare time for his students to discuss the target language related matters particularly outside the teaching time (Borg, 2006) and this can be done using the existing technology (e.g. social media). Borg takes this as an-outside-the-class support to acquire the language more effectively and it is one of the features which makes a language teacher differs from teachers of other subjects.

Being friendly to learners is also well-noted in the literature as the thing that a language teachers should be able to do. A language class has to be free from too much stress. In other words, it has to be a stress-free classroom (Kyriakides et al., 2002) and one way of doing this is by making a closed relationship with students (Thompson, 2008). If students have a good feeling towards their language class, they will then have the courage to ask questions, answer questions, negotiate ideas and participate actively in the all learning activities (Thompson, 2008). Obviously, literature suggests that the achievement of effective learning outcomes is influenced so much by the ability of a language teachers both in terms of their knowledge and command of the target language and their pedagogical understanding.

METHOD

This is a large-scale qualitative study which seeks to answer two research questions, namely: (1) What makes Indonesian learners of lower and upper secondary schools fail to acquire English effectively?, (2) What policy change should the relevant ministries undertake to deal with such a condition and to better cope with AEC/MEA?

This research took place in the province of West Kalimantan involving 28 secondary schools in which 14 of them were lower secondary schools (SMP) and the rest were upper secondary ones (SMA/SMK). Ten to fifteen students from each school were interviewed through focus group discussion to uncover their English learning experiences in their schools. So, in total, there were over 300 students taking part in this study. English teachers from each participating school were also questioned about their English teaching experiences. Number of teachers from each school varied according to the size of the school (i.e. number of students). Some schools were taught by 2 teachers but there were also others which had more than 2 English teachers. Besides involving students and English teachers, this study also observed the quality of the pre-service English teachers who studied at a private teacher college in the province. At the time of this study, this college had more than 600 pre-service English teachers learning at various semesters. Several lecturers from this college were also interviewed in this study.

Prior to the start of data collection, permission was sought from the authority to get access to schools. As soon as such permission was granted, visits to these schools commenced. More or less two months were spent to complete data collection activities in these schools. As previously mentioned, focus groups were conducted to collect information from students while to gather data from English teachers and lecturers, individual interview was used. Several observations were also conducted to see how English was taught and learned in the classrooms both at schools and teacher training college. All the collected data were subject to content analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Following facts were identified during the talks with students and in-service as well as pre-service English teachers and non-participant observations in the classrooms. Along with these facts, recommendations for possible policy change are provided.

Interviews in English with the teachers were meant to disclose their experiences and more importantly to know their English proficiency. Findings revealed that some of these so called English teachers were not like the real teachers of English since they could hardly speak in good English. For example, in one interview, surprisingly, there was one senior teacher teaching at one of top public schools in the region asking her fellow to translate the conversations for her. She admitted that she had not communicated frequently in English for a few years and found that her English skills were getting worse since then. In an observation, one teacher teaching at a senior high school enjoyed teaching English using Indonesian and used very few English instructions. When asked the reason for doing so, he argued that if English was used exclusively, his students would have a trouble understanding the message that he wanted to convey. Such a reality, however, was not totally true because during the interview in English, he did not speak English fluently.

In this occasion, he proposed a possibility for him and other English teachers in the region to take part in a continuous professional development enabling them to always advance their English skills and pedagogical competence.

As he argued: I have been teaching English for several years and are rarely invited or involved in training activities useful for enhancing my English and teaching skills. I expect the government to consider providing regular training activities for the English teachers in the region. With such trainings, they will always update the latest approaches to teaching English and more importantly they can always maintain and improve their English competence. (IET 2)

The above fact (i.e. teachers' poor English performance) was found to be, in part, rooted from the quality of English study program graduates. Several observations at one of teacher colleges revealed that many graduates could exit with a bachelor degree despite their still poor English proficiency level. Data of observation also suggested that a lot of English students in this college rarely interacted in English with their peers. Some classroom sittings further confirmed the fact where the majority of students did not participate actively in the classroom discussions. There were only a few of them (i.e. students with already good English) who would respond actively (in English) to the teachers' questions. Then, observations carried out in the classes of early semester students suggested that this college admitted many students despite their very limited knowledge of English. In one academic year, it could admit around more or less 200 new English students with over 30 students in each class. During interviews with some English teachers of this college, it could be understood that such a recruitment was mainly meant to generate a large amount of money from newly recruited students. This policy was put in place, she argued, since this private college had to survive its operation from students' contribution towards tuition fee.

Another lecturer of this college was not in agreement with the policy to recruit students with very limited knowledge of English since his college lacked facilities and strategies including a shortage of teaching staff with excellent skills of English and pedagogy which were essential to enable the optimization of students' English learning achievement. During an interview, he, for example, commented: I prefer having only a few students with sufficient knowledge and skills of English at the start of their Bachelor of Education program to having many but, with poor English. This English education program is designed to train pre-service teachers to be English teachers

who are capable of teaching English and having excellent skills of English. (EL3)

Echoing her college, another lecturer claimed that within the current condition it was almost impossible to help pre-service teachers acquire English skills within their undergraduate study duration if they possessed a very limited mastery of English knowledge and skills at the beginning of their study. It was only possible if the study program had the required resources including English lecturers with sound knowledge of English and pedagogy, excellent academic atmosphere useful for students to communicate actively only in English, good language laboratory, availability of native speakers, good monitoring system from the management and so forth.

Next, data of this study also revealed that students of secondary schools normally had only two classroom meetings lasting for two hours in each meeting for English lesson and rarely received additional supports outside their school time. The classroom activities were also dominated with the fulfillment of tasks written in the commercially attained textbooks. The tasks ranged from reading comprehension questions, sentence and paragraph writing, to dialogue performance. Observation notes proved that school students had difficulty to engage actively with the classroom activities since teachers relied heavily on the textbooks and failed to accommodate individual students' learning need. It was even harder for the teachers to help their students acquire English effectively because the students could not keep up with the given materials. In other words, the materials were not suitable for their current level of English.

The use of such materials was not without a reason as the teachers, during the interviews, argued that they worried so much with their students' performance in the national exam. Thus, the materials given to students were those which would likely to appear in the national exam. Data also revealed that the success of teachers' teaching was mainly seen from how well their students could performed in the national exam. Therefore, they often allocated parts of their teaching time for English test exposures and such a condition had distracted them from teaching English properly (i.e. for the mastery of English skills)

This study also observed a rather unfavorable situation with respect to students' motivation towards English learning. Many of them did not see the importance of English for

their future career. In fact, this still most world popular language can affect one's life quality very significantly. Data from the focus groups revealed that they chose to learn English because it was part of the curriculum and for this reason they never practiced using it outside the class time. Below are some of their comments during the focus group discussions: I learn English because I just have to learn it in this school. All I know is this foreign language is compulsorily taught at school. (ST4). Reason... I don't think I have a particular reason as to why I should learn English. If I may choose not to take it, I will not take it because it is a difficult language to learn. (ST1). English is a foreign language which all students must learn at school. Frankly, I only learn and use it in the classroom and never use it outside the class except if a task is given by the teacher. (ST3).

Next, conversations with teachers revealed that they lacked provision of professional development for their professional improvement. They, to date, relied so much on the working groups they had with other fellow English teachers in their region or sub-district and argued that such a once-a-month meeting was not yet effective to enhance their teaching knowledge and English skills. Thus, more regular and varied training activities which could be in the form of seminars, conferences, short courses, collegial teaching practices and research work became a necessity.

This research also observed a problem concerning the monitoring of teachers' work. Some of the teachers maintained that their teaching was rarely monitored or evaluated and for this reason they felt no pressure to change the ways they taught their students. They further argued that the local education office had put the monitoring system in place only by assigning a supervisor to update their teaching performance but such practice was far from effective. They claimed that a more comprehensive monitoring system had to be put in place because only through which teaching and learning quality can be maintained and guaranteed.

Finally, findings of this study also observed the inability of teachers to optimize the use of existing facilities to enhance students' learning. For example, many schools observed in this study had internet access but such facility was underused for supporting learning. In fact, internet provides a wide range of recourses for language teaching and learning. With this technology, they

can bring the real world information and events to the class. Students also need to be informed about how they can learn English independently with internet technology. Language laboratory in some schools was also underused. Teachers preferred teaching in their conventional class to doing in the laboratory. They can, in fact, use this facility to empower their students' learning of English, for instance, through monitored pair or group discussion. On the other side of the region, there were a few schools with no such facilities and teachers of these poor schools requested this type of technology in order to facilitate their teaching. It could be said that teachers of these poor conditioned schools were not lucky to be placed in such schools.

Discussion

First, it can be understood from the findings of this study that there were quite many English teachers who did not have sufficient skills of English. Some even could only utter a few correct English sentences during conversations. This is an absolutely worrying condition since their main task is to help train Indonesia's young generations to have good English skills particularly, in the wake of MEA. How can they effectively teach English if they themselves possess poor English competence?. Their failure to teach English properly may cause harm to future generations since a lot of future work force will be dominated by people coming from neighboring nations like Malaysia, The Philippines, Thailand, etc. Thus, such an alarming condition should be handled properly. The ministry of education and culture should set strict criteria, particularly, with respect to teachers' English proficiency level. For instance, a certain score of Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (e.g. 550) can be used as the filtering point. In short, only teachers with good English command should be granted permission to teach English at schools.

As presented in the findings, English teachers' poor English performance was also partly rooted from the quality of English education programs they attended prior to taking a post as an English teacher at school. For this reason, the ministry of research, technology and higher education, as the ministry supervising the operation of higher educational institutions, should apply a special strategy for universities and teacher colleges which run foreign language

education programs. For example, the recruitment process has to be carefully controlled. Only students who can demonstrate fair to good level of the target language ability will be admitted into the program. The use of standardized language test (e.g. TOEFL) is recommended to select new students. Then, as mentioned in point 1, a minimum passing score (e.g. 525 in TOEFL) has to be set for students to graduate with a bachelor degree in English education or letters. In line with this expectation, lecturers of this foreign language program should also possess excellent mastery of English (>550 in TOEFL).

Once this language program is occupied with students with good English, lecturers (as reflected in the pre-designed curriculum) can then focus their teaching more on competences that pre-service teachers need when they become the actual English teachers. Such competences may include pedagogical knowledge and practices, technology for language learning and teaching, research in education, skill courses, etc. Classroom instructions, too, have to be only in English. Obviously, the expectations of the learning program are twofold. First, the pre-service teachers will further upgrade their English proficiency in the study program and second, they will also advance their educational understanding. The latter one is important to train them to be a good educator. Once again, only teachers with excellent English should be deployed to schools.

Lack of meetings or hours for English lesson and improper teaching materials were also among the crucial issues identified in this study. First, to deal with the first matter, the ministry of education needs to add the number of meetings or teaching hours for English, for example, from two meetings to six or more meetings in a week. More importantly, there has to be assurance that more meetings should be accompanied with teaching approaches which focus on students. All the students have to be given a great deal of opportunities to interact either with peers or teachers in English in the classrooms (Noora, 2008). If the policy (i.e. addition of more hours for English lesson) is not possible, other efforts such as compulsory extra-curricular activities of English and the creation of English speaking atmosphere at school can be an alternative policy. Extra-curricular activities or outside supports (Borg, 2006, Saukah, 2003) can help boost students' English performance through outside classroom practices.

They may learn some theoretical knowledge of English such as grammar and vocabulary in the classroom but spend a lot of time for practices outside the class through extra-curricular work. Then, schools also need to generate English speaking environment. To realize this, all staff including teachers of other subjects have to be trained to do English communication and there should be agreed days and time that everyone should use English for communication between one and another (Saukah, 2003). This may not be easy in the first instance. It is the outcome of such an effort which later makes the next moves much easier.

Then, with respect to teaching materials, teachers should be given a great deal of authority to decide what is best to be taught to their students. Most importantly, students need to learn what they need to learn (Watkins et al, 2012), particularly, in terms of the appropriateness of materials with their English mastery level. This also implies that, where possible, students are grouped according to their level of English competence and the materials can then be adjusted accordingly. It is much easier to teach English to students with the same competence level rather than to deal with those with different English levels particularly when it comes to the decision regarding the sorts of materials to be presented in the classroom. The same principle also applies to the attainment of learning outcomes. However, this study is fully aware that saying is easier than doing. For this reason, the relevant ministry has to partner with a pool of English language and education experts to better deal the delivery and coverage of materials to be given to students. More importantly, such partnership has to be continuous since expecting an optimal outcome from only one-stop partnership is not reasonable.

Concerning the focus of teaching mostly on how to make students perform well in national exams, this study is in agreement with Saukah (2003) who argues that success of English teaching and learning should not only be seen from students' performance in the national exam of English. Other alternative assessments covering all the four skills should be made available for students to accompany the national level exam. This study, however, as part of its recommendation to the ministry of education and culture still sees the importance of national exam of English. It can eventually be used to understand the case

nationwide. But, such a test is only necessary if all the factors affecting success (see findings of this study for a comprehensive look) have been well taken care of. Otherwise, it will be a great waste of investment.

This study also recommends the ministry to utilize an internationally standardized English test such as TOEFL, TOEIC or IELTS. It may cost the government a lot of money but if the results are within their expectation after years of fixing the system, such a spending will worth nothing because the certificates can be used by the school graduates internationally (e.g. working for multinational companies or scholarship application). Less spending is a possibility through the use of a used version of the test (e.g. ITP TOEFL). The ministry may also consider using APTIS test which is more flexible than other existing tests (Council, 2013). The organization wishing to use the test may choose the skill it wants to test (e.g. speaking or listening only). The idea of using an internationally recognized test is particularly to obtain a more valid picture of students' English learning outcome.

Regarding the students' low English motivation level, the current study sees an urgency to change such a negative trend to be a more positive one. Teachers need to motivate their students frequently. They need to be informed that their good mastery of English will have a positive influence on their life. Access to international education through widely available scholarships and possibility to obtain professional jobs abroad are some of the things they may use for motivating their students. Testimonies from people who have achieved success due to their English mastery which can be accessed from internet may also be shown to students. The underlying idea is that without motivation, it is almost unlikely to achieve success in the learning of English. Therefore, teachers should also play a role as a motivator (Brosh, 1996).

Then, this study is also in a full support of teachers' ideas with respect to the provision of more relevant and frequent professional development activities in order to enhance their skills of English and pedagogy (see Rosenshine, 2012). However, such an expectation may not always be possible, particularly, in the part of government or in this case the ministry of education and culture since the country employs hundreds of thousands of teachers. However, such a teachers'

demand should be taken into consideration by the policy maker since it will contribute greatly to the success of English learning nationwide. The current practice employed by the ministry of research, technology and higher education through the provision of the above-mentioned training activities (i.e. through competition) may be copied by the ministry of education and culture. Another alternative is sending some excellent chosen teachers to participate in short courses, preferably abroad, and assign them to disseminate the knowledge and skills they receive to their fellow English teachers.

Next, as identified in the findings, monitoring or evaluation system was found to be still ineffective. This situation is rather worrying considering the fact that monitoring and evaluation play a vital role in determining the success of students' learning (for example, Bos et al., 2012).

For this reason this study recommends the ministry of education to work with teacher training colleges to plan more effective and practical ways of monitoring the works of English teachers in the classrooms. Experts from these colleges can be contracted and regularly sent to schools to evaluate the quality of English teaching and learning. More importantly, recommendations resulting from such a well-planned evaluation have to be followed up by the relevant authorities.

Finally, the inability of teachers to utilize teaching and learning facilities (e.g. internet and its various applications) should be handled urgently and with care since these facilities are often very expensive. Both teachers and students need to be given as many opportunities as possible to make use of these facilities in order to empower their English teaching and learning. Schools should create a good organizational culture in order to sustain the use of all the available technological facilities by their teachers and students (Marwan and Sweeney, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This study could highlight several causes of secondary school students' failure to acquire English effectively. It also proposed some recommendations to the relevant ministries to prevent such problems happening again in future. Learning from the outcomes of this research, it can be concluded that the work to be played by the stakeholders, particularly the ministry

of education and culture as well as the ministry of research, technology and higher education, will not be easy to empower Indonesian young generations through their excellent mastery of English. But, this is no longer a choice since ASEAN Economic Community or MEA has now been taking place. Like or dislike, the young generations need this language urgently.

As highlighted in the findings, quality of in-service English teachers and English study program graduates seems to be the most crucial issues that need to be immediately dealt with. A well-designed quality assurance system aiming to ensure that only the quality English teachers to be sent to schools nationwide is a necessity. Information from grade point average (GPA) is not sufficient to say ones' English proficiency level. As such, the use of a standardized test is highly recommended. Others matters as identified in this study are certainly not less important than in-service and pre-service teachers' quality. Therefore, they also need to be taken care of accordingly.

Like other research, the current study also has some limitations. It was conducted in one of the provinces in the country. The involvement of many other schools in other provinces for future study may provide a more convincing picture with regard to the quality of English teaching and learning at Indonesian schools. Next, the voices of the policy makers are not heard in this research. Future investigation may take such an opportunity because the information could better enrich ideas about how to improve the quality of English teaching in the country.

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