

THE CURRENT LEARNING COMPETENCES OF ENGLISH FOR VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES: DO THEY REALLY CATER FOR THE REAL-LIFE PROFESSIONAL NEEDS?

Ayu Alif Nur Maharani Akbar, and Gunadi H. Sulistyono

Universitas Negeri Malang, Department of English

ayualifnur@gmail.com; gunadi.hs@gmail.com

Abstract: Every pedagogical classroom decision to be implemented into classroom practice must be established logically on the basis of intended learning goals and objectives. These learning goals and objectives would reflect the ultimate expected competences for the graduates to master. Unlike in English for the general purpose, in English for specific purposes, particularly that for vocational schools, teaching learning activities could be far more complex as English as the means of communication is not the only aspect to set up the expected competences of the vocational high school graduates. Vocational high school graduates also need to master English in professional context. This study is content analysis-based research which aims to review the English vocational school graduates standards in order to find out whether or not the expected competences formally set up have met the current ever-compelling needs of global workplace.

Keywords: ESP, Learning Competences, Vocational High School

INTRODUCTION

Every teaching learning activity has its own fundamentals, particularly its own goals, and objectives which would affect the holistic elements of the teaching practices (Brown, 1995). A language classroom, indeed, aims to facilitate students in mastering the target language in which the only criterion of a successful English classroom is students' language mastery (Harmer, 2009). Students are expected to be able to perform the target language both as an arbitrary system and as the means of communication; they are expected to master the components of the language such as grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, as well as language functioned as the means of communication in real context. Regarding these goals and objectives, the teaching materials, the teaching methods and strategy, and the evaluation are necessarily designed in such a way as to reach the expectation effectively and efficiently (Sulistyo, 2015).

Compared to the general English classroom as explained previously, teaching English for specific purposes, the aim of which is to encourage language mastery for professional development, is quite unique— and unquestionably more challenging (Harsono, 2007: 169). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) argue that teaching English for Specific Purposes is teaching English to master the language for specified objectives based on students' need. Teaching learning activities in ESP program focus not only on language performances but also on the additional materials related to English competences needed as reflected in students' vocational programs catering to their future career. The program should be able to prepare the students with professional English communication competences needed in the working places, including

learning certain specific terms with specific meaning in that major (Poedjiastutie and Oliver, 2017:2). The expected outcomes of these ESP programs are not only the fluent English speakers, but also 'professional' language users having good capability in using the specific language for their domain (Robinson, 1991: 20).

As teaching English for general purpose and specific purpose applies different fundamentals and conceptualization of language, the teaching practices of both inevitably requires different interpretation in terms of what and how to teach, as well as how to assess students' learning (Robinson, 1991: 69). An ESP teacher should be able to recognize these differences so that the teacher would have a capability to create the ideal ESP classroom. Teachers should be able to notice what should be actually achieved, what they actually teach, and how the learning goals and objectives should be fulfilled. An ESP programs teacher should be fully aware that they should also integrate the ESP content and language performances. Otherwise, teachers' misconception about language would negatively affect the ESP teaching practices causing wrong implementation of teaching practices in the classroom (Kusni, 2013: 41).

This paper aims to investigate the English vocational school standards which represent the implementation of ESP in Indonesian and the ESP practices in the Indonesian school system. In order to achieve this goal, a content analysis study was conducted to examine the English graduate standards of vocational schools in the Indonesia school system. Moreover, possible challenges faced by ESP teachers are also discussed further in this article.

Standards to Practices: ESP in Indonesian Context and the Possible Challenges

The primary implementation of teaching English for specific purposes in Indonesian educational system can be observed in the English subject taught in vocational schools. The English teaching practices in the vocational high school should be implemented based on the designed curriculum by the Indonesian Ministry of Education (Decree of Indonesian Ministry of Education No. 20 year 2016). As mentioned in the curriculum, English teaching activities in the vocational schools should be conducted to achieve graduation competences generally regulated in the decree of Indonesian Ministry of Education no. 20 year 2016; these graduation competences are the ultimate goals that should be achieved by the vocational school graduates. In other words, these ultimate competences are the fundamental basis as the standards to set up teaching learning materials, teaching methods and strategy, and assessment in general (Decree of Indonesian Ministry of Education No. 20 year 2016).

As mentioned previously, English teaching in vocational school practices in Indonesia is conducted in order to achieve the graduate English competences stated in the decree of Indonesian Ministry of Education no. 20 year 2016. However, the decree of the Indonesian Ministry of Education number 20 year 2016 only presents the general points of what students should achieve, which cover three competences, namely, character, knowledge, and skill (Decree of Indonesian Ministry of Education No. 20 year 2016). The elaboration of the decree of the Indonesian Ministry of Education no. 20 year 2016 is presented in the decree of the Indonesian Ministry of Education no. 24 year 2016 containing basic competences of English mastery. The basic competence in the decree of Indonesian Ministry of Education no. 24 year 2016 contains two aspects: knowledge and skills. The knowledge aspect, as stated in the decree of the Indonesian Ministry of Education no. 24 year 2016, deals with English components that should be mastered by the students (Decree of Indonesian Ministry of Education No. 24 year 2016). Meanwhile, the skills aspect deals with four English skills for communication purposes: listening,

speaking, reading, and writing (Decree of Indonesian Ministry of Education No. 24 year 2016). Below is the example of basic competences 3.9 on knowledge aspect and 4.9 on skill aspect.

3.9. menafsirkan fungsi sosial dan unsur kebahasaan lirik lagu terkait kehidupan remaja SMA/MA/SMK/MAK (knowing the social functions and language features related to teenagers' life of high school and vocational school)

4.9. menangkap makna terkait fungsi sosial dan unsur kebahasaan secara kontekstual lirik lagu terkait kehidupan remaja SMA/MA/SMK/MAK (contextually comprehending the social functions and language features related to teenagers' life of high school and vocational school)

ESP classrooms necessarily combine both language mastery and students' future needs in the workplace (Aniroh, 2009: 170). In fact, the standards of graduates and the standards of competences do not differentiate the language mastery and competences for non-vocational high schools and those for vocational high schools. For instance, there is no specific curriculum and syllabus designed for ESP program in Indonesian vocational high schools (Kusni, 2013: 38). It is obvious that the competences mentioned in the standards only focus on the minimum general language mastery that has to be achieved by high school and vocational school graduates, without considering students' specific language needs based on the ESP principles. Meanwhile, as highlighted above, teaching English for general purposes and teaching English for specific purposes would be totally different. If the teachers are willing to enrich the students with ESP-related materials and teaching activities, they have to provide the materials and media by themselves (Harsono, 2017: 169). To some extent, this condition might cause particular problems and confusions in the practice of teaching ESP in Indonesian context if the teachers do not have the right conceptions of what the ESP teaching is and how to conduct ESP classroom.

Teaching ESP in Indonesian Context: Expected Challenges

As has been discussed previously, because there are no specific standards that set how English in the vocational school context should be, assigned ESP teachers are basically those who are fully in charge of creating the teaching goals and objectives based on what students' future learning needs. These teachers also have more chance to design how the class and the teaching tools would be—all teaching material, teaching strategy, teaching procedure, and teaching assessment. Therefore, the ESP teacher should have pedagogical competences, language competences, and sufficient knowledge on the subject matter. Teachers' teaching in English for specific purpose classes, as Aniroh argues (2009:176), should have these three criteria: positive attitude towards ESP content, knowledge on the subject, and consciousness on how much their competence on the subject is.

Aniroh's statements are also supported by Robinson (1991: 80) stating that an ESP teacher should have interest on the area and the language as well as should be able to respect students as they may know more about the domain compared to the teacher. However, the problem is the teachers themselves do not have these criteria and competences to design and to implement their idealized ESP classroom (Harsono, 2007: 169).

Based on the casual observations that I conducted in an accounting class in a vocational high school in Probolinggo Regency, the English teacher, who is actually a master program in ELT

graduate and a government scholarship awardee for teachers for professional development, cannot differentiate materials for non-vocational students and those for vocational students in how they should be contextualized. The teacher, at that time, only picked up the procedure texts about how to cook an instant noodle to be delivered to the students without paying attention to the content-related principles that should be maintained in ESP classroom. Meanwhile, ESP teacher has to maintain the authenticity principles in selecting the teaching materials in an ESP classroom (Robinson, 1991: 54). In addition, based on three times of observations conducted in the class, none of the teaching activities involved accounting-related content. In the speaking tasks, for example, students were asked to have a role play pretending to be hotel receptionist and customers. This activity obviously is not suitable for students' future professional need to communicate as an accountant (Harsono, 2007: 169).

During the interview with the English teacher from that school, he admitted that he did not really pay attention on giving content-related materials for the students. He said that he only followed the provided course book and students' work book:

“Saya biasanya mengikuti buku paket untuk mengajar. Biasanya anak-anak menggunakan LKS untuk latihan. Saya tidak menambahkan materi yang terkait jurusan mereka. Sebab menurut saya bahasa Inggris di buku saja sudah cukup. Anak-anak pun kurang antusias kalau materinya terlalu sulit.”

(I usually follow the course book while teaching my students. The students usually do the worksheet as the exercise. I never adjust any materials as the provided materials are already sufficient. The students seem like unmotivated if the materials are too difficult).

It is obvious that the teacher only accepted them as it was assigned in the textbook without realizing his roles as an ESP teacher. He said the most important thing was to help student achieving well in the national examination:

“Sebenarnya kan tujuan pelajaran bahasa Inggris ini adalah menyiapkan siswa agar sukses di UN nanti ya. Karena percuma dibuat yang bagaimana gitu, kalau pas UN nanti ya gak keluar”
(The main goal is actually preparing students for National Examination. Adding materials that are not tested in the National Examination would be a waste of time)

The fact is that, although the teacher provided nice and ideal ESP materials, the final graduation test would be the national examination in which the English performances in ESP context were not adequately assessed. Here is the example of national examination year 2016 listening item for vocational high school.

Man: Why didn't tell me your supervisor?

Woman: _____ .

4. Narrator: The best response is

- A. I didn't tell her why
- B. I thought I could handle it myself
- C. That would be fine too
- D. The problem was quite serious

(Source: https://www.itapuih.com/2017/03/pembahasan-soal-listening-unbahasa_24.html)

The issues raised by the vocational school teacher above are basically almost similar with Aniroh's research findings (Aniroh, 2009: 172) on the problems faced by ESP teachers. In spite of the internal problem related to teachers' mastery of language and the content of the subject as well as their pedagogical ability to combine both of the, according to Aniroh (2009: 172), there are five problems faced by ESP teachers in general: less time allotment given for English teacher, limited professional and personal contact with subject-matter specialists or teachers, a lower status compared to subject teachers, isolation from other English teachers doing similar works, and low respect from the students. A study conducted by Kusni (2013) also demonstrates the identical possible teachers' problems as what have been found in the observation. These essentially internal and external problems could be the barriers for teacher to implement such ideal English for specific purposes learning in the vocational high school context.

English for Professional Communication: Has the Expectation Been Fulfilled Satisfactorily?

The fundamental concept of ESP is to teach English competence based on what is needed by the graduates in the workplace and professional context (Robinson, 1991: 20). One department might have different needs with others (Robinson, 1991: 7). Take for example a look at the marketing department in the vocational high school. The students taking marketing department should have persuasive speaking ability to promote their product; they need to learn how to describe the product to the consumers and how to attract them to buy the product. On the other hand, students taking mechanical engineering would have different needs from the marketing students. The mechanical Engineering students will need to have more reading capability on how a machine works rather than persuasive speaking to attract consumers. Thus, before the class begins, it is absolutely necessary for teacher to do job-analysis as a part of needs assessment to know what should be taught in the class (Leki, 2003 as cited in Poedjiastutie and Oliver, 2017).

In practice, it should be admitted that teachers rarely conduct needs analysis to decide what students' need (Rahayuningsih, 2016: 30). Most teachers only follow the basic competences and the prepared materials as provided by the Ministry of Education without adapting them into their context. Other ESP teachers are willing to adapt the competences and materials in the curriculum and try to make them suitable for their context; only few of them truly conduct need analysis for their students and the rest of them instantly teach reading because they superficially think that it is the only thing needed by the students to access English materials related to the subject (Aniroh, 2009: 174). Indeed, the needs analysis would need further interpretation on what are actually needed by these students for their profession in the future. The need analysis could be done by reviewing related literature or even by conducting mini research on the related profession. These would help teachers to know what they should teach to prepare the students for workplace and professional demand.

Teaching English in vocational high schools ideally have to integrate the professional communication needs and the formal language lesson in the classroom. Therefore, the successful English classroom in vocational high school should provide both English mastery and the content/professional-related usage of the language. As different departments at vocational schools might have different prioritized language use related to their possible future profession, each of these departments might set up their own different language learning goals and objectives. This idealized atmosphere, in fact, is still hard to be actualized in most English classrooms in vocational high school because of challenges and problems as justified in the above

explanation. These obstacles appear mainly because of ESP teachers' misconception of ESP as well as teachers' inability to interpret students' need and to adjust ESP related materials (Aniroh, 2009).

CONCLUSION

English for specific purpose highly requires different approach compared to English for general purpose; general language mastery is not the only focus, but the potential use of the language in professional workplace should also be considered as fundamental. In fact, today's basic competences as mentioned in the decree of Indonesian Ministry of Education no. 24 year 2016 do not really differentiate the learning competences for the high school students and for the vocational school graduates. It is expected that the vocational school English teachers would be able to develop the learning activities and teaching materials by themselves by following ESP principles. However, the practices at school have demonstrated that many problems still exist and become major barriers to implement ESP principles in teaching English for Vocational high school. To overcome these issues, there should be a clear framework on how to teach ESP based on students' professional need. In addition, ESP teachers should be trained so that they have the right conceptions of ESP to be able to bring it out in practice.

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