

A SURVEY OF STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND THEIR NEEDS TOWARD ENGLISH LEARNING OUTCOMES AT VOCATIONAL COLLEGES

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ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to investigate students' English proficiency and their needs toward English learning outcomes. This research was based on a qualitative research design. The data were collected from 80 students who received an English proficiency test and eight students who participated in an interview session. The interview dealt with their needs and problems in communication skills in English. The result shows that there was no student who got excellent English proficiency level, eight students (10%) reached good category, 46 students (58%) achieved satisfactory category, 21 students (26%) were in poor category, and five students (6%) were in very poor category. In addition, all students need English for communication in their future profession. Finally, the results of the interview also show that industrial engineering students preparing to work in manufacturing various marble products face a serious problem in marketing their products to the consumers. In addition, the students majoring in tourism destination area considered that they have to communicate in English to support their job in providing services to tourists speaking different languages. Therefore, it can be concluded that vocational college students need transactional English in a specific field because they are being prepared to work in enterprises or to be entrepreneurs.

Keywords: *polytechnic, proficiency test, students' need, vocational college*

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INTRODUCTION

Under the agreement of ASEAN Economic Community, workers from all ASEAN countries are allowed to work freely throughout the countries and regions. To deal with the agreement, vocational educations prepare the students with skills to compete in the global market. Otherwise, English communication skills also become an essential subject to be prepared.

Polytechnic Aceh Selatan is the only vocational college in the Southwest coast of Aceh. The students are highly required to master English communication skills, both oral and written language. According to the curriculum of polytechnic Aceh Selatan, English is considered a very basic skill because students are prepared to work as a technician in a private company or government. As a vocational college, the teaching and learning process mostly takes place in the laboratory, and students do a lot of practice, including English practice.

Dealing with the expectation, Polytechnic Aceh Selatan provides a language laboratory to support lecturers in teaching and improving students' proficiency in learning foreign languages, especially English communication skills. The laboratory has been running several routines such as TOEP test, TOEFL test and English debate in order to participate in National University Debate Championship (NUDC).

English communication is seen as a necessary skill to learn. It's a necessary tool for talking, thinking, and learning. Oral language is a strong tool for learning because it molds, alters, expands, and organizes ideas (Nunan, 2003, p.55). Research conducted by Mahbub (2018) assumed that vocational colleges and schools should have relevant teaching material based on background knowledge and students' needs. It indicates that the teaching and learning of English in vocational school should be related to the field of students, and the whole teaching environment, teaching material, and textbook correlate with the student background. Other factors, in addition to the sort of high school kids attend, influence their language skills. Participation in courses by high school students may impact their academic success, and evidence shows that academic accomplishment may change depending on the school style (Bahar, 2013). Students' academic progress may be related to their language skills. This indicates that if students have a high degree of proficiency, they may receive higher results on tests in their academic disciplines. To some extent, improving English proficiency increases the chance of academic achievement. Sert (2006) discovered a link between

English language competency and academic achievement. According to the research, the stronger the pupils' proficiency, the more likely they are to achieve academic achievement, because English language competence is related with academic performance (Stephen et al., 2004). This might be due to students' lack of comprehension of the lectures and exam questions delivered to them in English.

Based on the observation, the student's English proficiency at Polytechnic Aceh Selatan is not satisfactory. They got problems in mastering English proficiency such as listening, reading, grammar, and writing. English proficiency is crucial for them to get better quality in education. In fact, there are many scholarships for the students to continue their studies, both in Indonesia or abroad. One of the compulsory requirements to register for the scholarship is an English proficiency test score.

Previous research on the student's English competence exists. Panyawong-Ngam et al. (2015) administered a proficiency exam, a satisfaction questionnaire, and a TOEIC test to their students. Their accomplishment and satisfaction levels were excellent on average, but their second TOEIC exam result was disappointing. Then, Kunasaraphan (2015) concludes that the study results demonstrated that English learning techniques typically employed by first-year students comprise six direct and indirect strategies, as well as disparities in strategy utilization among students with varying levels of English proficiency. Future research should investigate language learning strategy usage in conjunction with other research methodologies concentrating on other languages, particular language abilities, and the link between language learning strategy use and other aspects in different programs and institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English Proficiency

Listening

Listening is an important skill for learning since it allows pupils to get insights and information while also interacting effectively with others. Life, both inside and outside of school, provides numerous chances for listening, but some students miss out on them because their thoughts wander, or they are preoccupied with what they want to say rather than what the speaker is saying. Listening is the process of hearing,

recognizing, interpreting, or comprehending spoken language. It means that, in listening, the students do not only hear the material, but they must recognize and interpret or comprehend the information; therefore, they can explain or answer the questions based on the spoken language. Listening is one of the most challenging skills in English. It is more than just the unidirectional reception of audio symbols. Listening comprehension is, in reality, the psychomotor process of receiving sound waves through the ear and passing nerve signals to the brain.

Reading

Reading is an activity that serves a variety of functions depending on the reader. Every reader has a unique purpose that differs from others. People read for information or to expand their knowledge, and they may also criticize a writer's concept or writing style. People read for enjoyment as well as to improve their understanding of the language being read. In addition, Zhang and Duke (2008) states, "Reading is the active process of understanding print and graphic texts. Reading is a thinking process. Effective readers know that when they read, *what* they read is supposed to make sense".

For Indonesian pupils, English is still a foreign language. It is not simple to deduce a meaning or a concept from written materials. To comprehend a reading material, the learner must be well-versed in the meanings of words, phrases, and content, and most importantly, they should be able to grasp the writer's idea. According to Burns et al. (2002), reading is the process of recreating the meaning intended by the writers. As a result, when pupils read a book, they understand the meaning of each word as well as the writer's idea. Reading, according to Burns et al. (2002), is a participatory activity in which readers exchange ideas with the author through the text. In other words, readers who understand the author's point of view from the text exchange ideas with the author. It is the process of giving and receiving meaning on both sides of the reader-author relationship. Meanwhile, readers engage or transact with the author through the text, which implies that what the readers bring to the text in terms of knowledge, values, experiences, and beliefs is just as essential as what the author brings to the text's development.

Based on the definitions above, the writer concludes that reading is the process of getting the meaning of the content and the writer's idea about the topic. In this case, a reader should understand the idea and information in the reading texts.

Writing

Writing is an important tool for pupils to actively turn the passive knowledge and information in their heads into legible writings. Because writing is one of the abilities in English language acquisition that students should attain, there are several reasons why writing helps students learn. The first reason is because writing reinforces the grammatical structure, idioms, and vocabulary that teachers have taught the pupils. Second, when kids write, they have the opportunity to experiment with the language and go beyond what they have just learnt to express. Furthermore, as kids write, they get inextricably linked with the new language, p. the efforts to convey ideas and the frequent use of eyes, hands, and brain are a unique technique to reinforce learning.

Even in our language, according to Blanchard and Root (2003, p. 1), writing may be challenging. Writing in a foreign language might be much more challenging. The good news is that writing necessitates the acquisition of abilities that can be learned, practiced, and mastered. Writing, particularly academic writing, is difficult, according to Oshima and Hogue (2009, p. 3). To gain this talent, you must study and practice. Langan (2000, p. 12) supports the views by stating that because writing is a talent, children should be motivated to learn how to write. He goes on to add that writing is about pupils' ability to organize their thoughts into written material for certain goals.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research involves both quantitative and qualitative research design. The quantitative method was used to measure students' English proficiency, listening, reading, writing, and grammar test, while the qualitative method was used to identify students' problems, needs, and solutions for the English learning process. Webb (2007, p.105), as quoted from Munadi, states, "The quantitative research is a formal, objective, systematic process in which numerical data are enjoyed to obtain information about a phenomenon."The sample in this study is all of the population. The writer took 80 students as the sample to find out the objectives of the study related to the student's English proficiency and also their problem in improving their English proficiency

To obtain the data, two instruments were used in this research in order to answer the research problems. They were an interview guide and an English proficiency test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the classroom, the lecturer used the direct teaching strategy in teaching. The students' performance is different between one student and others. The writer can conclude that the student's English proficiency at Polytechnic Aceh Selatan was adequate. It can be summarized based on the result of the test. There was no student (0%) who got excellent category. Then, eight students (10%) reached the good category. Afterward, 46 students (57.50%) achieved adequate category. Then, there were 21 students (26.25%) who got poor category, and the other 5 students (6.25%) were in very poor category.

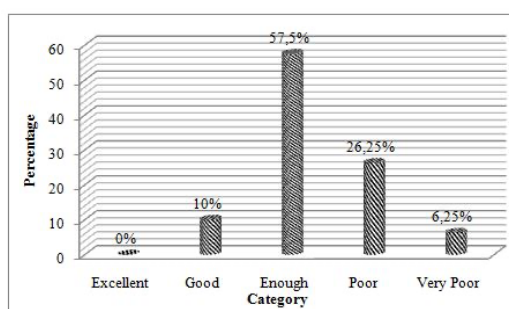


Figure 1. The summary of students' English proficiency levels

As shown in the figure above, most of the students get adequate English proficiency levels. Only 10% achieved good category. It can be summarized that their proficiency in English was not satisfactory. This indicates that students of mechanical and industrial engineering do not meet the English qualification skill required in a vocational college. As a result, students are not ready to compete in the global market.

Result of Interview

The writer interviewed some students to find out the second answer to the research questions. Eight students were selected as the sample, and they were required to answer several questions. The result was described as follow:

Apa rencana anda setelah lulus dari Politeknik Aceh Selatan?

[What are your plans after graduating from the South Aceh Polytechnic?]

The first question was about students' future and how they are going to use their skills in real life. Keffi Anggraini and Puput Ana (Industrial Engineering students) stated

Saya ingin mengembangkan produk makanan dan minuman yang berbahan dasar pala, dan memasarkannya secara luas tidak hanya di Aceh Selatan, tetapi juga sampai ke seluruh Sumatera dan Pulau Jawa.

[I want to develop food and beverage products made from nutmeg, and market them nationally, not only in South Aceh but also throughout Sumatra and Java.]

According to the statement above, it indicates that they need communication skills in marketing their products, not only their Bahasa Indonesia but their English, which also depends on their consumers.

Apa tujuan akhir dari belajar bahasa inggris di Politeknik Aceh Selatan?

[What is the ultimate goal of learning English at the South Aceh Polytechnic?]

The second question was about the goal of learning English in Politeknik Aceh Selatan. As stated by Adir (Mechanical Engineering), a student from Pulau Banyak Barat, he said:

Target saya belajar Bahasa Inggris supaya bisa bicara dalam Bahasa Inggris, karena pekerjaan masyarakat di kampung saya rata-rata adalah nelayan dan bisnis pariwisata, kampung saya sering dikunjungi turis dari luar negeri.

[My target is to learn English so that I can speak English, because the work of the people in my village is usually fishing and the tourism business, my village is often visited by tourists from abroad]

Adir is a student from Haloban Island, Pulau Banyak Barat, Singkil. He assumed that he needed English for communication, especially in tourism. It also indicates that Adir was going to work as a tourism worker.

Apa masalah yang anda hadapi dalam belajar bahasa inggris?

[What problems do you face in learning English?]

The third question deals with students' problems in learning English. According to Puput Ana (Industrial Engineering Student) and Adir (Mechanical Engineering Student), there are many grammatical rules to take for granted so that the communication sometimes was stuck the first time they started speaking. Puput Ana clearly stated:

Saya terkendala bagaimana menyusun kalimat di dalam kepala saya sebelum saya berbicara, saya takut jika salah menyusunnya dan akan berbeda makna yang di terima.

[I have a problem in arranging sentences in my head before I speak. I'm afraid if I put it wrong and the meaning will be different.]

The statement above would describe the difficulties of English grammar rules they have learned the whole time since they were Junior High School students. Otherwise, it also declares that they are afraid of making grammatical mistakes. Another explanation came from Nurjannah (Mechanical Engineering Student), she stated:

Ketika mencoba berbicara dalam bahasa inggris, saya biasanya terkendala dengan pengucapan, tata bahasa yang rumit, dan kosakata yang masih sedikit, sulit menghafal kosakata baru

[When trying to speak in English, I usually have problems with pronunciation, complicated grammar, and small vocabulary, it's hard to memorize new vocabulary.]

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the findings of this study as discussed in this paper, some conclusions can be made. First, the English proficiency of the fifth semester students at Polytechnic Aceh Selatan was just adequate. It can be summarized based on the findings in each category of proficiency. No student was categorized into the excellent category. Then, eight students (10%) reached the good category. Afterward, 46 students (57.50%) achieved adequate category. Then, 21 students (26.25%) got the poor category, and five students (6.25%) were in the very poor category. Second, the problems faced by the students in improving English proficiency were due to a lack of practice. They learn it in the classroom, and they only learn it when the lecturers were

monitoring them. Some students said that they did not finish the task given by the lecturers, and sometimes they only copied other students' work. They also did not have motivation to learn English; therefore, they did not follow the class seriously. Some students participated the class to complete the attendance list. Therefore, the students could not understand the information or knowledge provided by the lecturer.

Suggestions

The writer also provided some suggestions that could be taken into consideration by the lecturers, especially in terms of organizing the teaching process for English for Specific Purposes. The students should learn English more in the classroom and after the class. They can use any media such as the internet, online book, and the movie, magazine, or songs available in English. It helps them to improve their English proficiency. The lecturers should teach all aspects of English proficiency, including listening, reading, grammar, and writing. They can apply some strategies such as the use of media, models, and approaches in teaching the students.

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