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Problems Encountered by Indonesian Learners of English and English Teachers’ Difficulties to Carry out Classroom Action Research

Permasalahan yang Dihadapi Pelajar Indonesia dalam Belajar Bahasa Inggris dan Kesulitan yang Dialami Guru dalam Melakukan Penelitian Tindakan Kelas

Ifan Iskandar, Ratna Dewanti (Universitas Negeri Jakarta) (Jakarta State University)

Abstract

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis permasalahan dalam belajar Bahasa Inggris yang dialami siswa SMP, SMA, dan SMK di Indonesia dan kesulitan guru Bahasa Inggris dalam melakukan Penelitian Tindakan Kelas. Survei dilakukan terhadap siswa dan guru Bahasa Inggris di Jakarta dan sekitarnya. Permasalahan yang dialami siswa dari ketiga jenjang yang diteliti relatif sama, yaitu yang terkait dengan pengucapan dan kosa kata. Permasalahan utama yang dihadapi guru Bahasa Inggris dalam melakukan Penelitian Tindakan Kelas adalah menentukan dan memanfaatkan rujukan teoretis yang relevan dan mutakhir.

1. INTRODUCTION

English, despite its ubiquitous use in many parts of the world, remains a challenging subject for Indonesian learners to master. It does not only require students to relate many English linguistic elements as the background knowledge, but also to make use of those elements in the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Crabtree and Powers\(^1\) (1991) use the term linguistic knowledge to explain the elements of phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics, pragmatics, and spoken style. These elements can be categorized into lexicogrammar, a term used by Halliday in 1961\(^2\). These elements are considered the bases of English language skills; the micro and macro skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The English language knowledge and skills are the points of departure to identify the problems encountered by Indonesian learners.

These problems are relatively similar to those identified by Oxford Royale Academy\(^3\) (2014). They believe that there are at least four difficulties due to the nature of English language encountered by English Foreign Language learners. The first and second difficulties are the English lexicogrammatical features in which English has large and tricky words, idiosyncratic spellings, idioms and slangs as well as idiomatic variations and subtleties of the grammar. The next challenge is the complexity of the pronunciation in terms of the tricky sounds, inconsistent relationship of pronunciation and spellings, silent letters, and a plethora of regional dialects. The last is the variations of English; different English speaking countries have different varieties of English.

In Indonesia, English teachers are expected to cope with the English learning problems through classroom action research. It is required for teachers to have the capacity to carry out classroom action research (CAR) as one indicator of professional and pedagogical competence (The Decree of Education

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and Culture Ministry No. 16 Year 2007 on Competence Standard and Academic Qualification). CAR is assumed as a means to enhance the quality of teaching and to improve research skills of prospective teachers.

Ten years after the issuing of the decree, teachers’ capacity to carry out CAR is still developing. This means that CAR which is expected to solve problematic issues in English language teaching and learning remains ineffective due to the insufficient CAR skills among the English teachers. The teachers still find it difficult to discern English learning problems potentially developed into research problems and formulate the problems into research questions. In 1993, McKerman found that lack of research skills among teachers was the fourth hurdle of the eleven that impeded the performance of CAR. These difficulties to carry out CAR and students’ problems in learning English are strategically important to strive for a breakthrough in the teaching of English language in Indonesia.

2. METHODOLOGY
This study is designed to investigate the problems encountered by students in learning English language and teachers’ difficulties in conducting classroom action research. It employs a survey conducted from May to August, 2017 in Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi. The data of the study are students’ problems in learning English from students and teachers’ perspectives and teachers’ difficulties to carry out classroom action research. The data sources are students and teachers of Junior High Schools (SMP), Senior High Schools (SMA), and Vocational Schools (SMK). The instrument is questionnaires distributed to respondents in two versions, online application form of the questionnaires and printed questionnaires.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Of the 2,200 printed questionnaires distributed to students and teachers, 946 questionnaires were returned. The questionnaires were distributed to SMP students (750 sets and 406 were returned), SMA students (500 sets and 190 were returned), SMK students (500 sets and 239 were returned), SMP teachers (150 sets and 71 were returned), SMA teachers (150 sets and 33 were returned), and SMK teachers (150 sets and 25 were returned). The data collected from the questionnaires were analysed to find out the problems encountered by Indonesian students in learning English and teachers’ difficulties in conducting classroom action research.

3.1 Problems in Learning English Language
The problems in learning English encountered by students cover the problems in learning the English listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These problems are seen from students’ and teachers’ perspectives and presented accordingly. From the students’ perspective, the problems in listening of SMP students range from difficulties in understanding the meaning of expressions or sentences having heard once to difficulties in understanding the meaning of expressions or sentences heard three times. More than 50 percents (54.2) students believe that getting the message by hearing it one time is difficult. In the same

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fashion, 56.3 percents teachers agree that students have difficulty in understanding the meaning of expressions or sentences when they hear one time only. However, according to 83.1 percents of them, the more difficult problem is to differentiate two words with similar consonant sounds as in *view-few or she-see.*

The other problems experienced by the students are the difficulty to answer inferential questions, to get implicit information, to understand meanings from elliptical forms and specific sentence structure, to get the meaning from the use of cohesive devices, and to differentiate words with similar vowel sounds. The problems which are not ranked high in the students’ perspective were in identifying the topic of the talk, answering word class-related questions, recalling words or short expressions, understanding sentences based on intonation, distinguishing statements from questions, identifying stressed and unstressed syllables of words as in *develop* atau *procedure,* understanding sentences with pauses, and identifying the name of places. The other unpotential problems according to the students’ perspective were in identifying the roles of people in a conversation, identifying elements of chunks as in *in front of,* *a cup of tea;* and understanding the meaning of an expression or a sentence after having heard them three times.

In addition to the above findings, there are also findings from what the students wrote on the note. They said that they had problems in understanding what they listened to especially when the speaker spoke fast and unclearly, when they were not familiar with the words and how they were pronounced, when they did not know the meaning of the words, when they had to translate the words, and when they could not focus their attention due to the noise in the class.

From the teachers’ perspective, it can be said that teachers have the same perception as the students do on the problems. They agree that students have difficulty in understanding the meaning of expressions or sentences being heard to them once. However, according to 83.1 percents of the teachers, the more difficult problem is in differentiating two words having similar consonant sounds. Other problems are differentiating two words having similar consonant sounds, understanding the meaning of expressions with specific sentence structure and elliptical forms, differentiating words with similar vowel sounds, getting implicit meaning, and understanding expressions heard three times.

The problems encountered by the students in learning speaking cover self-correction of their words and grammar, fluency, making meaning using correct words and sentence patterns, using varied forms to convey meanings, using formal and informal forms for the purpose of communication, using cohesive devices, manipulating body language, using correct stress, using fillers, pronouncing similar sounds, pronouncing gambits correctly, having correct intonation, using contraction, and pronouncing words with similar vowels and words with aspirated sounds.

From the teachers’ perspective, the students’ problems in speaking are ranked differently by the teachers - starting from problems in utilizing alternative strategies such as fillers, using correct words and sentence patterns, using varied grammar, using formal and informal forms, pronouncing words with similar consonants, speaking fluently, pronouncing words with similar vowels and words with aspiration, correcting their mistakes, using word stress, body language, appropriate vocabulary, cohesive devices, intonation, gambits and contraction.

In reading, the students find potential problems in using rhetorical structure to understand the text they are reading, using certain cohesive devices to help understanding the text, finding specific information using any strategies, utilizing background language, relating information they read to the readers’ cultural context, understanding explicit and implicit meaning, identifying genre and purpose of the text, identifying cause and effect relation, using words or short expressions to help to understand the other parts of the
reading, identifying important parts of the text, and getting information of *who, where, when, how,* and *which* quickly.

In teachers’ perspective, the reading problems range from problems to relate the information in the text to their cultural contexts, to use words and their order and sentence structure to understand the text they are reading, to use their knowledge of rhetorical structure, to look for specific information using reading strategies such as guessing meanings from context and schemata and punctuation, to use cohesive devices, to get the explicit and implicit meaning, to use certain words or short expressions from the previous part, to use their background knowledge, to identify the genre and the purpose of the text, to identify important parts commonly written in bold or italic, and to identify *who, where, when, how,* and *which* in a short time.

The problems of writing covered the ones in using various sentence patterns to express meaning, using writing strategies such as outlining and paraphrasing, producing a text with explicit and implicit meaning, producing a text according to the purpose and genre of the writing within limited time, using grammar and correct pattern to produce acceptable writing, producing a text with correct key words and appropriate use of words, using rhetorical structure, using cohesive devices, producing a text with a main idea and supporting ideas, relating information in the text with the readers’ cultural context, producing a text suitable to its genre and purpose, and producing a text with correct punctuation, spelling, and mechanics respectively. Other problems as noted by the students are translating words from Indonesian to English, using words to construct sentences, using to be in a sentence, composing stories, using correct spelling, producing writings suitable to their genre and purposes, understanding English words rarely used, knowing the meaning of words and using it correctly in sentences, using conjunctions, and lacking of vocabulary.

In the teachers’ perspective, the biggest problem in writing is the difficulty to use varied sentence patterns to make meanings (84.5% teachers agree with this). The second big problem is to use writing strategies such as outlining, paraphrasing, and using synonymy, to produce a text with correct grammar and acceptable vocabulary for explicit and implicit meanings, to produce a text with correct use of punctuation and mechanics, to produce a text with correct key words and word order, to use grammar and text pattern knowledge, to use cohesive devices, to use a main idea and supporting ideas, to relate certain information with the readers’ cultural context, to produce a text in a given time according to its genre and purpose, to use rhetorical structure, and to produce a text with the correct spelling.

Other problems cited from the students’ notes are constructing a correct sentence, lacking of vocabulary, lacking of grammar knowledge, lacking of punctuation and mechanics and capitalization, translating from Indonesian to English, lacking of productive skills, lacking of tenses knowledge, lacking of reading, lacking of cultural knowledge, using mother tongue language, using short message style, arranging jumbled words into sentences and sentences into paragraphs, lacking of motivation, lazyness to look up the meaning of new words in dictionary, Indonesian English, describing things, completing and combining texts, giving feedback to the peers, and understanding authentic texts.

### 3.2 Problems encountered by SMA students

The problems in learning English encountered by the students cover the problems in learning listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These problems are taken from the students’ and teachers’ perspectives and presented accordingly. The problems here refer to the problems they encounter on the basis of students’ experience and teachers’ observations. The students’ answers of the questions in the questionnaires are assumed as the problems that the students experience and it can be used as the basis for proposing them for
classroom action research (CAR) projects using Umbrella Model of Inquiry (UMI) and Multi Site Research (MSR).

In the students’ perspective, the biggest problems SMA students face in listening are in understanding meanings of an expression or a sentence when it is heard only one time (58.9% students agree with this). Compared to SMP students’ problems, they are alike. In other words, this problem is important and potential to overcome using UMI and MSR. Teachers in the two different levels can work together to solve this problem.

The second problems categorized as difficult by 50% of the students are the problems in answering questions related to implicit meaning and elliptical forms. The other problems are about understanding meaning in specific sentence patterns, differentiating words with similar consonants as in view-few or she-see, using cohesive devices, and answering inferential questions. Other problems are difficulties in differentiating sentences with rising and falling intonation, understanding meaning related to the use of word classes (nouns, verbs), differentiating statements from questions related to their intonation, differentiating words with similar vowel sounds as in sheep-ship or saw-so, remembering or mentioning particular words or expressions after being heard, reading stressed syllables in a word as in develop atau procedure, understanding sentences with pauses, identifying topics of a talk, locating the events in a talk, identifying the roles of the speakers, identifying each word of an expression, and understanding meaning when hearing them three times.

It is found in learning speaking that almost 70 percent (68.9%) students agree that being able to speak fluently according to the context of situation is a problem. The other important problems are correcting their mistakes when speaking, using vocabulary and grammar suitable to the purpose of speaking, using varied grammar to achieve the purpose of speaking, using appropriate vocabulary, using correct formal and informal style, using suitable cohesive devices, and pronouncing words with similar consonants as in tree-three or day-they. Other problems stated by around 30% respondents are the problem in using mime and body language suitable to the purpose and context of communication, pronouncing the words with the correct stress, pronouncing certain gambits correctly, using falling or rising intonation to differentiate statements from questions, using alternative ways (fillers) to deliver the meaning. Other less difficult problems are pronouncing words with similar sounds as in ball-bowl atau test-taste, pronouncing contraction forms as in fridge (refridgerator), don’t (do not), or won’t (will not), and pronouncing words with aspirated sounds as in paper-time-key.

In reading, it seems that the students do not find big problems, only about 45 percent (47.4 to 40) students think that they have problems in using their knowledge of rhetorical structure, of word meaning and word order and sentence patterns, of cohesive devices to understand the text, and to relate certain information to cultural contexts. About 30 percent (36.3 to 30.5) students believe that they have problems in using their background knowledge to draw conclusion, finding specific information using reading strategies as guessing meanings from contexts and discourse markers, understanding implicit and explicit meanings, and identifying the genre and purpose of the text. Other problems are recalling words or short expressions to understand the next part of the text, identifying cause and effect relationship, identifying important parts in bold or italic, and getting information about who, where, when, how, and which quickly.

About 50 percent of the students of writing class agree that they encounter problems in using various sentence patterns to express meaning in a text, using writing strategies, synonymy, paraphrasing, using grammar and generic structure, using cohesive devices, using acceptable vocabulary and correct grammar to present implicit and explicit meanings, using key words and correct word order, producing a
writing under limited time, and using rhetorical structure. Whereas the problems of relating information to
the readers’ cultural contexts, producing writing with the main idea and supporting ideas, suitable with the
genre and purpose of the writing, correct spelling and punctuation are considered not very difficult
(answered by 36.8 -24.7% students). Similar findings are found in the teachers’ perspective for four skills,
listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

3.3 Problems encountered by SMK students
English learning in SMK is different from that of SMA due to the different goals of the schools. However,
the skills and the knowledge taught are the same - listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and
vocabulary. The perspective was taken from 239 students and 25 teachers of SMK. In listening, the
problems were almost the same. The most difficult problem is in understanding messages heard only one
time and the easiest is in understanding messages heard three times. Other problems are differentiating
words with similar consonants or vowels and understanding implicit meaning.

The problems in speaking are a bit different from what SMA students encounter. For SMK students,
the ability to speak fluently according to the context of speaking becomes the obvious problem. This is
perhaps due to the different goal of English learning. SMK students are supposed to work with customers
so that fluent speaking is more required. The other problems are quite similar, such as problems in using
various grammar to express meaning, correcting their own mistakes while speaking, using suitable
vocabulary and correct grammar in speaking, and pronouncing words with the correct stress and aspiration.

In reading, using cohesive devices becomes the first problem. It is also different from the problem
that SMA students have. This is probably due to lack of time allocation for the teaching of English in SMK.
The least difficult problem of finding who, where, when, how, and which quickly is the same as faced by
SMA students (only 17.2% students considered this difficult). In writing, the first problem is producing a
written text according to its genre and purpose under limited time. This is also different from SMA
students’ first problem. SMA students’ problem is using various sentence patterns to express meanings in a
text. This is, again, perhaps because of limited time allocation for English in SMK so that students rarely
get practice. Of thirteen problems, almost all are considered having the same difficulty by more than 50%
of the students.

From the teachers’ perspective, the problems of listening are more on differentiating words with
similar consonants as in view-few atau she-see. The least problem is in understanding meaning of sentences
with pauses. Even in almost all problems, more teachers seem to be more convinced of the problems. This
is different from the students’ perspective. This is possibly because the students try to recall their
experience whereas the teachers use their observation as the basis of perception.

In speaking, the teachers see the problem of using suitable cohesive devices to express meanings.
This is in line with the problem in reading from the students’ perspective. Other problems are related to
pronouncing words with similar sounds as in tree-three atau day-they and ball-bowl or test-taste; and the
least problem is pronouncing contracted forms. It can be inferred that most of the problems are found in
micro-skills of speaking. In reading, the first problem of SMK students is also different from that of SMP
or SMA students. The problem is in understanding implicit and explicit meanings in a text. However, the
last problem, getting the information of who, where, when, how, and which quickly is similar.

The first problem in writing encountered by SMK students is producing a written text with the main
idea supported by supporting details and the least problem is using various sentence patterns to express
meanings. Other problems are using cohesive devices and correct grammar to compose an acceptable
writing. From the findings, it can be inferred that cohesive devices need to be focused more in the teaching of English in SMK despite the limited time allocation.

3.4 Teachers’ difficulties in conducting classroom action research

This section presents the results of the identification of difficulties faced by English teachers of SMP, SMA, and SMK to conduct CAR. The difficulties will become the basis for focus group discussion as the first step to implement UMI and MSR-based CAR model. The difficulties of the teachers of SMP, SMA, and SMK are relatively the same, ranging from collecting and selecting relevant theories or references for the basis to discuss the discussion of the findings, measuring validity, reliability of the instruments, to collecting and selecting theories for the basis of analyzing data. The other difficulties deal with constructing research instruments, determining the cycle, planning, reflecting and acting, and observing, chain of reasoning, selecting feasible problems for CAR, formulating the problem, drawing conclusion, and reporting the research report.

Other difficulties taken from the teachers’ notes are time constraints, curriculum and school demands including national examination preparation, getting a collaborator, students’ motivation, and lack of training. It can be said that the teachers still find it difficult to discern English learning problems potentially developed into research problems and formulate the problems into research questions as what Burns\(^8\) and Iskandar\(^9\) found out in the previous studies.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Referring to the analysis and findings of this research, three conclusions can be drawn. First, the problems faced by SMP, SMA, SMK students in learning English are relatively the same. The first problem is in pronunciation and vocabulary. These two aspects result in listening problems. Not knowing how to pronounce words may make the students do not recognize the words when the words are pronounced even though they know the meaning of the words when they are written. This becomes even worse with their lack of vocabulary. Writing becomes a difficult skill for the students. Limited vocabulary makes the students do not even know how to start writing or develop it.

The second conclusion deals with teachers’ difficulty in conducting classroom action research. There are three difficulties – in collecting and selecting relevant theories, in measuring the validity and reliability of the instrument, and in selecting relevant theories to analyze the data. The difficulties may be caused by lack of reading related to English teaching and learning and the limitation of experience in conducting classroom action research and writing research report. Based on the conclusion, it is suggested that the portrait of students’ problems in learning English can be used to improve the quality of teaching. Besides, there is also a possibility to conduct research on classroom management to deal with non-academic aspect such as the situation in the class.


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