

Literacy Skills among ESP Students

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Abstract: This paper presents the issue of second language literacy skill among English for Specific Purposes (ESP) learners. It is widely believed that ESP learners in Indonesia often struggle to acquire the target language competences. It is due to the artificial learning materials and activities leading to a gap between what the learners have in the classroom and in the learners' real life. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to analyze English literacy skills of senior vocational school students in Muaro Jambi District both on reading and writing skills. The results reveal that more than 85% of the senior vocational high school students have problems in comprehending English passages and expressing their ideas into English written texts. Based on the descriptive analysis, it is also found that using commercial worksheet, limited time allocation for English lesson, learning General English for the sake of National Examination and big classroom size are the problems that contribute to the phenomenon. The learners need to be introduced to the authentic materials and activities which are in line with their major in order to be more literate in their field of study. In conclusion, ESP learning materials and contextual English use are important language learning component for ESP setting.

1 INTRODUCTION

The fast growth of English students for specific purposes in their job markets has caused more interests and needs at Senior Vocational High Schools in Indonesia. Thus, enquiring Senior Vocational High School students' literacy skills in English for Specific Purposes (hereafter ESP) is very essential where they need the skills not only for competing in the global further jobs but also comprehending any text types related with their job activities. Since literacy skills in ESP context is significant topic, this research concerned on the students' literacy skills focused on both reading and writing skills.

It is not deniable that Vocational High Schools students in ESP setting are confronted with many problems in this country. Their major problems dealt with vocabulary, grammar, ESP contextual constraints (the location in which it is taught), time availability, budgeting, facilities, and teachers' qualifications (Poedjiastutie and Oliver, 2017:4). This present article focuses on the literacy problems regarding reading and writing which involved problems in comprehending English texts and expressing their opinions into any English genres such as descriptive, procedure, recount. Moreover,

there were problems of language components namely structure, vocabularies, texts organisation and social functions of the texts. In fact, there is still limited research about literacy skill on Vocational High School Students, especially on English for Specific Purpose area. The research that have been done so far usually focus on literacy on EFL learners in general or on ESP students' problem. Therefore, this article is written as part of bigger scale on developing ESP materials for Vocational high School Students in Jambi Province setting. Obtaining the answer for the following research questions will allow the researcher to have adequate information in improving the English materials:

- 1 What are the difficulties faced by the students regarding the literacy skills (reading and writing) in ESP context?
- 2 What are Senior Vocational High School students' literacy skills of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context with the focus on reading and writing during learning activities in the classroom?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Ghanbari & Rasekh (2012:112) explain that English, the lingua-franca of almost all professional and academic settings, has come out in EFL/ESL circles as the English for specific purposes (ESP). This popular catchphrase of presently English language teaching programs, has been used to provide students with the foreign language skill and relevant professional knowledge necessary to succeed in their work fields. With the rapid development of fierce competition of business and industry, business communities around the world have deemed English language skills as an important tool needed to compete in the global economy. English is one of international language facilitating Indonesian students to encounter external challenges in industrialized communities and modern trades namely in *World Trade Organization (WTO)*, *Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Community*, *Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)*, and *ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA)*. This trend has caused ESP instruction to more greatly highlighted for the last few years at vocational schools in Indonesia. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) materials are considered vital aspects to help the students using contextual and authentic the language learning sources.

English is one of obligatory lessons learned by Senior Vocational High School students in Indonesia. They have limited time to learn and practice the language in the classroom. The students cannot use their English in everyday activities and communication, since it is a foreign language in this country. They learn English for ninety minutes which can be divided into two meetings within a week (Permendiknas No. 22 Year 2006 about Content Standard for Primary and Secondary Education). This condition makes English lesson difficult for Indonesian students especially in ESP context. It is necessary for the language students use the target language through a real practice in their daily activities to help them easily mastering it. Furthermore, Margana and Widyanto (2017:26) confirm that Vocational High Schools (VHSs) in Indonesia which run the 2013 curriculum are necessary in facilitating their students to learn English for Specific Purposes in accordance with their study programs. For example, when they take a business and management study program, the English materials should be related to their fields, namely business and management development instead of general English. Because they are oriented to be skilful workers in reference to their fields, this

suggests that the English textbooks used by students of SVHSs should be different in nature.

Richards and Schmidt (2010:198) define ESP as a language course or program of pedagogical practices which consist of the content areas and objectives of the course with regard to the fixed specific needs of a particular group of learners. Referring to this statement, Vocational High School students should have specific needs according to their backgrounds. Since they need mastering English speaking skills to communicate in their workplaces, they have to acquire not only the other three skills (listening, reading, and writing) but also the three language components (pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar). By having so, they are accustomed to handle any job and being well literate due to the use of ESP in discourse of workplaces. In relation to this statement, Hyland (2007:155) strongly urges that when genre-based writing courses are organized around the texts students will need to use in a particular target context, and these needs are easier to identify in ESP situations. A vocationally oriented writing course, for instance, may be organized around the range of oral and written genres needed in a particular workplace. He, furthermore, exemplifies a group of laboratory technicians have to keep inventories of materials, receive written and verbal instructions from scientists, take notes during experiments, write reports, etc.

Cahyono and Widiati (2011:75) explain that many secondary teachers are tempted to see writing as one the first things to be cut back, or relegated to the end of the English teaching or to homework. The writing activities tend to be excluded in the classroom, because the time allocated for writing skill was considerably inadequate. Therefore, the Vocational High Schools (VHSs) received not only insufficient writing practices but also the skills. They are not familiar with some writing processes (outlining, drafting, etc) which can be used as their guidelines expressing their ideas into written text genres.

The students' reading activities such as identifying reading topics, figuring out detailed/important information, guessing meaning from contexts and recognizing references in the English texts are main concern of the reading class of this research. Cahyono and Widiati (2011:49) assert that the teaching of reading as a foreign language (EFL reading) in Indonesia can be generally included in the teaching of reading comprehension. This is because it aims to improve the skills of learners, who have been able to read in their first language and in EFL, understanding the meaning of a written text.

3 METHODS

3.1 Participants

The context of current study was a Vocational High School in Muaro Jambi Regency, Jambi Province, Indonesia. In this school, English is as medium instruction in the classroom only. In this study, there were 28 students and 3 English teachers from one of Senior Vocational High Schools in Muaro Jambi Regency who are currently learning in Agriculture Department. The purpose of this study was to collect data of their literacy skills in ESP focusing on either reading or writing and the difficulties faced by the students. The current study made use of questionnaires and forum group discussion as methods of gathering and validating data.

3.2 Research Procedures

Questionnaires were distributed and analyzed to identify problems faced by Vocational High School students in terms of reading and writing in ESP context. Observing students' either reading or writing activities/ exercises and interviews of selected students were fundamental to answer the research questions as well as build comprehensive and clear explanations in the data analysis and findings in the study.

A qualitative analysis of the 28 Vocational High School students was carried out through the use of questionnaire. This research instrument had three parts; personal profile, reading and writing skills in ESP context. It consisted of 14 items across the following criteria of the text genres; text organization, language features and social function. In addition, qualitative analysis of the same participants was carried out through observation and interview. The observation concerned on the writing process starting from outlining/ drafting process until the complete/ final writing paragraphs. Moreover, in reading class the observation focused on students' reading activities in comprehending the ESP texts.

Interviews with 3 English teachers of Vocational High School were done to collect more in depth opinions, apart from seeking confirmation and validation. It also gave chance to the researchers to clarify, justify and explain extendedly the points that were made by the students for the different and similar problems that they came up with.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Questionnaire Results and Analysis

The data analysis focused on the analyzing the results of the present study which explored the SVHS students' problems of literacy skills on both reading and writing skills. The questionnaire data were analyzed based on three main parts; the first part was analyzed their personal profile while the second and third parts which was 14 items of reading and writing criteria with their respective responses calculated the percentage of each component and analyzed them descriptively.

After gathering the participants' personal profile, the researchers continued with 14 items concerning the students' problems of literacy skills (reading and writing) in ESP context. In order to ascertain the difficulties of reading comprehension, 7 items were took in order to answer the research questions. The items were adapted based on the microskills for reading comprehension. The components are recognizing grammatical word classes, recognizing particular meanings, recognizing transition signals, recognizing communicative functions and purposes, distinguishing between literal and implied meanings, detecting culturally specific references and using both scanning and skimming skills.

In addition, the researchers referred 7 items to identify their writing difficulties namely organization of the text genres, content, coherence, sentence constructions, vocabulary, mechanics and communicative functions of the written texts. Table 1 illustrated the results of this reading comprehension analysis and table 2 showed the analysis of writing problems.

Table 1: The percentage of reading comprehension problems.

Item Statement	Percentage	Level
Recognizing grammatical word classes	85.7	Difficult
Recognizing particular meanings	89.2	Very difficult
Recognizing transition signals	85.7	Very difficult
Recognizing communicative functions and purposes	75	Difficult
Distinguishing between literal and implied meanings	92.8	Very difficult

Detecting culturally specific references	89.2	Very difficult
Using both scanning and skimming skills	78.5	Difficult
	85	Very difficult

Table 2: The percentage of writing problems analysis.

Item Statement	Percentage	Level
Organization of the text genres	85.7	Difficult
Content	92.8	Very difficult
Coherence	89.3	Very difficult
Sentence constructions	85.7	Very difficult
Vocabulary	92.8	Difficult
Using of mechanics	82.1	Difficult
Communicative functions of the written texts	92.8	Very difficult
	85.7	Very difficult

It is pretty obvious, that Senior Vocational High School students in Muaro Jambi Regency have difficulties regarding the literacy skills (reading and writing) in ESP context as the total percentage was 85.7%. It can be inferred from the results above that the students literacy skills (for the two skills) are not good. Such results are due to the fact that English lesson is still have limited time allocation in the school. Especially in teaching reading students have not much more comprehensive reading activities to help them comprehend the English texts effectively. In addition, teaching writing skills is almost neglected by English teacher. This result confirms with Cahyono and Widiati research on 2011 regarding the teaching of writing. In their study, they found that English teacher did give sufficient time for students to do pre-writing activities, like brainstorming ideas, making the outline, and drafting the writing. However, when it comes to the main writing practice, the teachers would ask the students to do the rest of writing activities at home or outside the class. The teachers think that the students can do it by themselves. Consequently, there is not enough feedback that the students can obtain from the teachers in order to improve their writing.

4.2 Results of Observation Analysis

Since the focus of this research was Senior Vocational High School students' students literacy skills, it is necessary to observe their both reading activities and writing process in the classroom. The

literacy skills were taught integratively and allocated for 90 minutes within a week. In the reading class, it was found that the students were guided to read the English texts loudly, facilitated to figure out the unfamiliar vocabularies, translated the texts and answer the comprehension questions together with their classmates. In Margana and Widyanto's study about developing English Textbook for VHS (2017:26), they found that Students of SVHS do not practice to acquire the micro-skills of reading comprehension of ESP texts which are needed in their daily reading practice not only in the school but also for their future jobs.

Moreover, from the observation it was identified that the students had no writing practices or activities instead of completing the paragraphs, arranging jumbled sentences, dictating sentences, translating from Bahasa Indonesia into English, etc. The time allocation was too limited which could not be designed the meaningful writing activities. The students did not have any model how to express their feelings or opinions into English written texts. The teachers did not present and show some strategies to teach writing skills.

4.3 Interview Results and Analysis

In the interview session, the researchers started concerning on the teachers' knowledge of literacy skills in ESP context to identify their understanding about the concept. While the three interviewees admitted to their understanding on certain level of literacy skills, teacher A highlighted "I teach English based on the available students' worksheets which are suggested by the headmaster. I do not pay attention to the literacy skills of ESP context especially for Senior Vocational High Schools students, because the syllabus do not specify them.

Teacher B, moreover, confirmed that she has been familiar with what literacy skills are in ESP context. She tried teaching English with this ESP learning materials, but the National Examination does not concern on ESP context. Therefore, they were worry to have the ESP learning materials.

In addition, teacher C explained that their students have lack of motivation to learn English because they believe that learning this language is for the sake of passing National Examination only. The teacher used the ESP context in their English class, but the students have poor vocabulary level and grammar competences.

Overall, every teacher has similar cases which are related between one another. The teachers do not have authority to give specific English learning materials

such as ESP which relevant with their specific study major. Since the syllabus do not recommend them to do so, they refer to their teaching guidelines. Eventhough they know that literacy skills for ESP context is relevant nowadays.

To sum up, part of this research confirm previous research that has been done on the area of literacy in High Schools context, regarding the limited time of practice. Meanwhile, another part of this research concerning the ESP area is somehow require further investigation on why students' performance on writing and reading on ESP texts are considered low. One explanation that might account for this situation is that the students are almost rarely being exposed to ESP materials.

5 CONCLUSION

This research focused on analyzing the Senior Vocational High School students' difficulties regarding their literacy skills (reading and writing) in ESP context. The data analysis from the questionnaire demonstrated that more than 85% of the students in Muaro Jambi Regency dealt with problems in implementing the two literacy skills in ESP context.

Their reading comprehension problems were consisted of recognizing grammatical word classes, recognizing particular meanings, recognizing transition signals, recognizing communicative functions and purposes, distinguishing between literal and implied meanings, detecting culturally specific references and using both scanning and skimming skills. The writing difficulties, then, were namely organization of the text genres, content, coherence, sentence constructions, vocabulary, mechanics and communicative functions of the written texts.

More than 85% students had poor literacy skills in ESP context, as they did not practice to acquire the micro-skills of reading comprehension of ESP texts which are needed in their daily reading practice not only in the school but also for their future jobs. The students had no writing practices or activities instead of completing the paragraphs, arranging jumbled sentences, dictating sentences, translating from Bahasa Indonesia into English, etc. The time allocation was too limited which could not be designed the meaningful writing activities. The students did not have any model how to express their feelings or opinions into English written texts. The teachers did not present and show some strategies to teach writing skills.

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