

IMPROVING ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IN INDONESIA: USING LITERARY WORKS AND EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This study investigates the persistent low English proficiency in Indonesia despite the widespread teaching of English as a compulsory subject from elementary to university levels. Despite numerous reforms, including the introduction of competency-based learning (CBL) in 2006, challenges such as inadequate textbooks and a lack of student motivation have hindered significant progress in English language teaching (ELT). Given Indonesia's prominent role in ASEAN, this low proficiency is particularly ironic and problematic. The research examines the effectiveness of using literary works to improve English proficiency among Indonesian senior high school students. A qualitative methodology, comprising student questionnaires, class observations, and formative tests, was employed. Findings indicate that students heavily rely on their prior knowledge and personal experiences to comprehend and engage with historical contexts presented in literature. However, gaps in historical knowledge and limited classroom resources contribute to incomplete and sometimes inaccurate understanding. The study underscores the need for balanced, resource-supported teaching methods and the integration of cultural and historical contexts to enhance English proficiency in Indonesia..

Keywords: English Proficiency, Competency-Based Learning, Qualitative Methodology.

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INTRODUCTION

English has become the most popular foreign language in Indonesia. Moreover, the Ministry of Education directs that English should be a compulsory subject from elementary to university level. This situation has led to the growth of private English language courses to fulfil the demand for English language skills. In fact, the courses are not only for school age students; some course providers run toddlers' programmes. Ironically, according to Language for Future (Council, 2013), Indonesia is categorised as a nation with low English language proficiency. Thus it can be concluded that English pedagogical activity has not been sufficient

yet. The figure for proficiency is from other Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. It is ironic because Indonesia is considered as the partner of the prominent European countries in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) (Cook & Singh, 2020). ASEAN works in political and economic sectors primarily to promote economic growth and regional stability among its members.

Another problem in Indonesia is about English language teaching. The Government has introduced different reforms to improve learning methods since 1975. However, Gillham (2022) and Papi & Hiver (2020) claims that there have been no significant changes in the success of English teaching methodology, despite many reconstructions. The latest change happened in 2006, when the ministry of education introduced competency-based learning (CBL) as the newest standard teaching technique. However, the implementation faces several problems. Based on the survey conducted by Marcellino (2015), there were obstacles such as the English textbook, which was found to contain grammatical errors. Furthermore, CBL needs students' active participation and motivation, but this is not always present (Alghazo & Alshraideh, 2020; Listia & Febriyanti, 2020). Sadly, then, these changes have not yet resulted in any significant and substantial development in English Language Teaching.

The other reason why the situation is ironic concerns the country's national position (Muecke, 2021). Compared with other ASEAN countries, Indonesia is the biggest by size and population. It enjoys an historical role as the founding member of the organisation and is highly active in local markets. Most importantly, Jakarta is claimed to be a regional leader and a driver of regional integration processes (Muecke, 2021). Therefore, with all of its strength, Indonesia needs more improvement to compete with other countries. Thus, to contend with other nations, a good standard of English is considered as a significant component as a medium for communication.

In the meantime, foreign language is too complex to be learnt only in the classroom. Currently, teachers have to deliver all English language skills to complete the national curriculum. Principally, all English skills have to be listed in

the national curriculum. Practically, time limitation is a problem for English language teachers in delivering all the skills. The time allocation for English language is four meetings a week, divided into two daily sessions. For high school students, reading and writing gets the most elevated portion of time, while listening and speaking get a lower ratio. This is because of several factors, such as limited resources.

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METHOD

This study aims to scrutinise the effectiveness of using literary work for Indonesian senior high school students studying English as a second language. Thus, qualitative methodology will be used to gather and analyse the data. This method is chosen because it could dig into the study to investigate students' experience in studying the English language. A qualitative paradigm is regarded as appropriate for the study because it analyses personal experience more deeply. According to Abraham et al. (2021) and Sullivan-Bolyai & Bova (2021) data in the form of words, actions, and records are amenable for examination using a qualitative method. The study was conducted as a series of activities which were then evaluated and analysed. The data findings are in the form of student responses

on questionnaires, class observation, as well as formative tests of students' linguistics skills. The formative tests are in the form of short writing tests and sentence vocabulary tests based on the stories.

RESULT

There were 20 students who participated in this study; however only 17 will be the subjects of a full analysis because only 17 responded comprehensively. In order to attract students' attention, before reading stories, there were some introductory activities. In the first, students were strongly encouraged to watch videos about the Reformation Era as well as WW1. Then, there was class discussion to discuss the topics. After that, students were given a questionnaire related to those historical events. This activity aimed to determine students' understanding about the setting of the stories before they read them.

Analysing data gathered from the first written questionnaire, which related to the Reformation Era, most students simply said „do not know“ about questions they did not understand. Meanwhile some students tried to answer using their prior knowledge. It was recorded that some responses were correct while others were incorrect. From the data, it was also concluded that generally students could outline the New Order and the Reformation Era. Generally, students could declare that the New Order was ruled by Suharto and Reformation Era was established after the fall of Suharto, although most simply gave short answers without trying to elaborate.

Basically, this limited information indicated that students' used their prior knowledge or personal experiences in declaring their understanding about the New Order and Reformation Era. Apparently, all of the students lived in the Reformation Era; even though they did not experience its beginning, which was the most chaotic situation in recent history, they still felt the impact until the present moment. Furthermore, since there are still unstable political and social conditions in Indonesia, people sometimes like to compare these two eras. That is the reason the students used their personal experience to declare their understanding about the New Order and Reformation Era. Then, their personal experience is used as their source of knowledge. This is in line with the characteristics of reader-response

which comprises readers' social factors – their social environment, personal experiences, and personal beliefs. In this case, with the limitation of their information, students tried to display their knowledge of the event. However, due to the limited information, a limited number of students gave incorrect answers.

Meanwhile, there was a small group of students who could explain in slightly more detail the New Order and Reformation Era. The descriptions are given below:

„Order Baru is the term coined by the second Indonesian President Soeharto to characterise his regime as he came to power in 1966. Era Reformasi is the era in Indonesia which has been in a period of transition with the fall of Soeharto in 1988.“

„Order Baru was an era where the political situation controlled by the President Soeharto, but the era reformasi is an era which the political situation controlled by presiden Habibie and works until now.“

„As far as I'm concerned, the transition from the New Order to the Reformation Era was rooted back to the "dethronement" of the then-current president, Soeharto.“

Analysing the data above, it can be seen that students' personal experience provided some groundwork in explaining their knowledge about the historical event. Thus, it made their arguments stronger. Even though, as stated above, the number of students who understood the issue was not large, they could describe each era and differentiate between the two eras. From this data, it is also seen that students' basic knowledge informed the answer. Principally, personal experience is welcomed in creating correlation between text and readers, where it produces an engagement.

It also was seen that most of students could mention the differences between the two eras. Basically, they could provide the correct answers. However, almost all students could not give a clear explanation. A student talked about the era of change, another student mentioned political and social matters, while the changing of the President was also noted. Basically, those answers were correct; they just could not elaborate. Therefore, when they had to explain in more detail, they could not give details in their answer. However, there was also an answer which did not

give a correct reason. There was a student who stated that the differences between these two eras were about human rights and the 1945 Constitution.

„The different between the two eras is the democracation (human rights and Undang-Undang Dasar 1945 (The 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia).“

The truth was that nothing changed regarding human rights and the 1945 Constitution. Thus, as has been discussed above, points out that reader response begins with personal interpretation. However, the lack understanding of the historical event made limited perception of the story, then created misinterpretation of the story. Thus, this data showed that inadequate mastery of the topic created a constraint.

Further, when there were questions about another issue, most of the students still could not give detailed explanations in their answers. Generally, they simply gave short answers. To questions relating to the social and political situation in the Reformation Era, some students proclaimed that they did not know, others said that social and political conditions were bad. However, there were still a small number of students who could describe the historical context in more detail.

„All of situation is very chaotic because the economic system of Indonesia is fall down.“

„Same with the situation of the social situation.“

„In the reformasi era the social situation was very crowded along 1998 when President Soeharto was down from President.

„And the political situation was very corrupted because the mayor and Government had very high inflation and the curs of Rupiah between US dollar was not controlled by the bank of Indonesia.“

„I think the Reformation Era suffers socially due to the myriad happen stances of crime and juvenile rebellion, as far as I know.“

„Politically, the Reformation Era is strongly criticized for its blithe Unconcern towards the public.“

Generally, these data findings offered some elements of portraying Indonesia at the beginning of Reformation Era. There were unstable social, economic, and political conditions. Again, personal experience and perception shaped students“

conception. The data also indicated that some students had already had knowledge about the Era. Further, based on the researcher's class observation notes, it was clear that most of the students already knew about the Reformation Era, even in a limited way. Thus, it can be concluded that the data showed that students recalled their schemata about historical events in developing the ideas.

To sum up, from the data findings above, it was evaluated that students could use their personal experience and called on prior knowledge, to respond to the topic. Some students also gave indications of using their critical thinking in answering the question by elaborating on the answer instead of giving only a short reply. Therefore, it was concluded that the videos which address the most chaotic time during the Reformation Era gave them a trigger to recall prior knowledge. However, it is unclear how much the videos influenced their understanding about the Reformation Era. Meanwhile, it should be noted that group and class discussion helped them to comprehend the historical story. In short, students' comprehension about the Reformation Era was basically based on their own prior knowledge, which was then activated by the videos and strengthened in group and class discussion. Thus, in this study, it could be determined that students' answers reflected their prior knowledge about certain eras. This prior knowledge related to their personal interpretation concerning the topic discussed. It is also connected with their social milieu and personal experience which shaped their understanding about the story.

DISCUSSION

The study highlights a notable contradiction in the field of English language teaching (ELT) in Indonesia: despite English being the most widely studied foreign language and a mandatory subject from elementary school to university, Indonesia nevertheless demonstrates lower English proficiency in comparison to its Southeast Asian counterparts. Despite the Ministry of Education's various educational changes, such as the introduction of competency-based learning (CBL) in 2006, the level of proficiency remains low. Gillham (2022) highlights other problems associated with the implementation of these reforms, such as textbooks that contain

numerous grammatical errors and a widespread lack of student interest and engagement. This situation is notably paradoxical considering Indonesia's important position in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), where it is anticipated to assume the role of a regional leader. Indonesia's significant political and economic influence in the area is due to its enormous population and historical role as a founding member of ASEAN. Hence, possessing a high level of English proficiency is vital for successful communication and competitiveness in the global arena.

An essential problem in Indonesian English Language Teaching (ELT) is the difficulty of instructing a second language within the limited space of the classroom. Teachers are confronted with the challenging responsibility of addressing all language skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking, within a restricted amount of instructional time. Frequently, resource limitations result in a disproportionate focus on reading and writing, which impedes the overall advancement of English language skills (Bahari & Gholami, 2023; Scott & Husain, 2021). The objective of this study was to investigate the efficacy of utilizing literary texts in enhancing the English language skills of senior high school students in Indonesia. The utilization of qualitative techniques, encompassing student questionnaires, class observations, and formative exams, yielded a thorough comprehension of students' engagement and comprehension. The results indicated that students predominantly relied on their existing knowledge and personal experiences to comprehend and react to the historical setting of the Reformation Era as depicted in the narratives.

The initial questionnaire replies revealed a basic understanding of the New Order and the Reformation Era; however, the knowledge provided was not extensive or detailed. A significant number of pupils had the ability to recognize important individuals and occurrences but encountered difficulty in providing detailed explanations beyond fundamental facts. The utilization of personal experience and prior knowledge is consistent with the ideas of reader-response theory, which highlights the significance of the reader's social environment, personal experiences, and beliefs in the interpretation of texts (Li et al., 2024;

Mujiyanto & Hartono, 2020). The class activities, such as video viewing and group discussions, seemed to stimulate students' existing knowledge and improve their comprehension. Students who had personal or familial experiences related to the Reformation Era had a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Nevertheless, the restricted and occasionally unreliable data presented by students also exposed deficiencies in their historical knowledge, which impacted their overall understanding and analysis.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion, it was deduced that engagement did not work well in this study. Even though there was some engagement, that is, about students' understanding of the stories and their effort in undertaking the study, it was teacher assistance that made the activities run well. The failure was due to students' lack of reading habit, socio-cultural constraints, and lack of vocabulary. Meanwhile, motivation was another drawback; basically, the lack of motivation was a result of students' lack of enthusiasm for reading. As stated in Chapter Four, in Indonesia reading is not a popular activity. Therefore, knowing that they had to read literary works, where the theme was an historical story, they started to feel bored. In the meantime, students who loved reading stated that they felt engaged with the activity. However, there were not many in this category.

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