Current Challenges in Teaching English in the Least-developed Region in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English as a Foreign Language is challenging. The body of literature has addressed the issue of the current challenges in teaching English as a Foreign Language. However, only a few studies have investigated the issue in remote areas of Indonesia. This qualitative study investigates the current challenges in teaching English in the least-developed region of Indonesia based on the following criteria: language comprehension, method and approach, practical implementation, and socio-cultural environment. The data were collected from four English lecturers in one of the teaching universities in Indonesia. The participants were selected using purposive sampling technique. The data were collected using in-depth interview and field observation which were then analyzed descriptively. The results of the study reveal that the participants have to deal with several obstacles in teaching English. Those obstacles include the students' low proficiency of language comprehension, limited resources of materials, a communication gap between lecturers and students, students' lack of enthusiasm and participation in learning and lack of environmental support from society. From the observation, the participants show that the challenges are mitigated by adjusting their choice of pedagogical instruction and learning materials according to students' level of language comprehension. The study suggests that infrastructure development is strongly essential to establish a good teaching environment. Besides, creating positive understanding and paradigm about the sanctity of learning English for students might be able to help the students' to study English better.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a foreign language is always challenging. There are always imperfect institutions, imperfect people, and imperfect circumstances which are called "adverse circumstances" to deal with (Brown: 2001). Moreover teaching a foreign language becomes more challenging if the setting of a place is in The Least-developed Region or *3T (Terdepan, Terluar, Tertinggal).* The teaching and learning process in Landak regency is far beyond the ordinary condition because of the socio-cultural condition and lack of facilities.

In this region, English as a foreign language might be considered as an "alien language" because it is really strange and difficult for some learners even though they should have learned it since they studied it at Junior High and Senior High. However, it is common to find college learners who have a low ability to mentioning numbers in English. Referring to this condition, teaching English is very challenging.

According to Crystal (1997), the acquisition of the English language as an international language can guarantee the availability of opportunities to employment, travelling, higher education, and even better life. However, the society in Landak regency has a common proverb which says, *"Sekolah semangkok, tak sekolah semangkok".* It means there is no difference between people who study and those who do not study because they would get the same result for living. This is the sociological perception of most society here towards the importance of education.

Teaching a foreign language in Indonesia is challenging. Hartono (2016) examined six Indonesian EFL university teachers about professional development and the result was the participants were more focused on pedagogical practices within professional development. He also suggested that the institutions should give more support to the professional development programs. More challenges in teaching a foreign language in Indonesia are widely spoken by teachers unfortunately, they are not well documented as valid references because of limited publications.

Other studies of teaching foreign language are beneficial to track the challenges even though they were not conducted in Indonesia. Çelebi(2016) found that problems in foreign language teaching in Turkey resulted from the troubles in teaching mother tongue and the use of books and materials which were not relevant with Turkish culture, way of thought and learning styles. Akalin & Zengin (2007) revealed two problems when conducted research about the perception of people in a foreign language. The first problem was the lack of realistic objectives and the second one was to spend much time on grammar rather than language skills. Aydin and Zengin (2008) focused a study on the role of anxiety on foreign language found that the major reasons for anxiety were the exam and negative assessment while the minor reasons were the teacher behaviors, different learning styles, and cultural diversities. Buyukyavuz and Inal (2008) in identifying problems in foreign language involved 132 in-service teachers found that there were lots of crowded classes in state schools filled with students with different language levels, learners were not guided to take responsibility for their own learning outside the classroom, language exams were designed on multiple choice format instead of projects and portfolios, the majority of teachers professional development was nothing more than studying grammar and preparing for language proficiency examination for state employees, and the traditional classroom seating setting prevented from effective teaching in classes. Çetintaş (2010) found that the most important problems in foreign

language teaching in Turkey were the lack of sustainability from the primary school to secondary school in terms of course books and curriculum throughout education. Edge (1996) emphasized that EFL countries should strive to develop language teaching methods that consider the political, economic, social, and cultural factors and most important of all, the EFL situations in their countries.

None of those previous studies was conducted in the least- developed region especially in Indonesia. This study may fill the gap and give a real description of the current issue in EFL since teaching a foreign language especially English is really challenging. This research becomes more interesting since the studies on EFL teaching in Indonesia especially in the Least-developed Region are hard to find. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the current challenges in teaching and learning English in one of the least-developed regions in Indonesia at the college level from the perspective of the lecturers. This research also aims at drawing the present map of the various factors involved in teaching EFL.

METHODS

This multi-case study investigates the lecturers' perceptions toward the current challenges in their teaching and learning English in the least-developed region. The perceptions were described narratively. Four participants were involved in this research. They were teaching English in the English department at the same college. All of them had previous teaching experience in teaching English in big cities in Java before they moved in Borneo.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling technique. The guided questions were asked to the participants when in-depth interviews were conducted. They were asked a question, "What were the challenges you had when teaching English in your class, here?" Adopting the present study from Solak and Bayar (2015) about the current challenges in English Language Learning in Turkish EFL context, the limitation of the themes was made: language comprehension, method and approach, practical implementation, and socio-cultural environment. The researcher considered that those themes were enough to represent the needs of the data. The transcribed data was organized and coded using thematic analysis before summarized and narrated descriptively. Field observations were conducted to triangulate the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The overall classification of the data collected from the participants would be presented under the following themes below:

Language Comprehension

All the participants considered that most of their students had low proficiency in English mastery. They might lack for initial ability from the schools. The students admitted that there were insufficient learning of English and materials when they were in Junior and Senior High. The previous study from Çetintaş (2010) noted that the most important problem in foreign language teaching in Turkey was the lack of sustainability from the primary school to secondary school in terms of course books and curriculum. As a matter of fact, it gave a real proof that initial

schoolings were regarded to be important to give background knowledge for students to comprehend English.

The previous justification that the students' mastery of the English language was limited was realized by the participants under these findings: they would be protested if the classroom communication was pushed to be conducted all in English, the students had difficulty to understand what they were supposed to do during the classroom activities until several explanations and examples, the students had a great difficulty to understand text in English, and feedbacks were neglected even though enough motivation had been given; it seemed that they did not really care about it.

Method and Approach

Reducing the gap in classroom communication, making groups discussion helped the students a lot because they got assistance from their friends. Both individual and group presentation helped the students to be braver in practicing English. The students' presentations were usually very short, especially in individual presentation. Meanwhile, group presentations were usually dominated by the leader of each group because most of the groups' member was very passive and relied on the leader of the group.

Grammar-based teaching was not considered a practical method because it would be very confusing and frustrating for the students. This finding was in line with Zengin (2007) that spent much time on grammar rather than language skills was not effective. When writing sentences, most of the students did not know the concept and the classification of words. Limited vocabulary acquisition that they acquired forced this into a painstaking teaching method.

The use of assistive technology was very important to be introduced in teaching. It would be able to make an interesting teaching method, promoting the students into the modernity of English education, and enrich the students with soft skill in using laptop and internet. Referring to Graddol (2006)English was often claimed to dominate computers and the internet, and that those wishing to use either must first learn English. However, the trend of copying and pasting was unavoidable when the students submitting their task. They wanted the easiest way to get credit. In addition, as obligatory, the use of technology could only be conducted as long as there was an electricity supply. Unfortunately, a blackout was a common situation here. It happened almost every day, the worse was three or four times within a day with various durations.

Practical Implementation

Using task-based learning lived the class better than grammar-based learning because the students became more active. However, when task-based learning was implemented in groups' discussion, most of the passive students kept relying on the leaders in their groups. According to the participants' experience, a group of two or three was the best arrangement for classroom activity under the condition that each group has a fast learner student as the leader of the group. The personal presentation would be so hard for some students because they could not express and convey what they wanted to present. In this case, the lecturer had to give extra effort in assisting them in giving translation and explanation.

In training and familiarizing the students to the use of assistive technology, PowerPoint presentation became one of the requirements in completing the task at least once in one semester for each possible course which needed to be presented. The alternative was the students had to send their works through email. In preventing plagiarism, similar work under the same construction and content would not be accepted and got no credit. Both online and electronic dictionaries were very effective in practicing pronunciation since it could be installed on the students' mobile phone.

To keep the students away from getting bored, the English teaching could be done outside the class by seating on the field or under the tree by making a circle or U-shape. Generating the previous study from Buyukyavuz and Inal (2008) that traditional classroom seating prevented from effective teaching in classes, bringing the classroom outside shifted the classroom situation especially when the electricity blackout or the daylight was too hot to study.

Socio-cultural Environment

The common proverb in Landak region, *"Sekolah semangkok, tak sekolah semangkok"* which states that the educated and uneducated people would achieve the same result for living created a serious problem in educational society because the average of the families preferred not to send their children to school. Early marriage was very common in this region. They thought that working was cooler and more beneficial rather than studying. Working would produce money but studying would expend money. Working was more important than education. Somehow, educated parents gave support to their children to work. Most of the male students had part-time jobs. As the effect, they came to class with the low patient in learning English. Moreover, married students had no time to study because they had to look after their children.

All the participants had the same perceptions that the students were dreaming to mastery English well but they wanted it instantly because they almost never learn English after class/ at home. When they came into the class they just came without preparation. The given materials would not be read otherwise they were told that it would be tested on the next meeting. They were lack of intrinsic motivation to learn. This fact was interesting when being compared with the previous study, Buyukyavuz and Inal (2008) when identifying problems in foreign language found that learners were not guided to take responsibility of their own learning outside the classroom. Here, in Landak even though the learners got enough extrinsic motivation from the participants, the responsibility of their own teaching was still very low because they had no eagerness in learning English well. They were impatient with the process of learning.

The Least-developed region had limited infrastructures and public facilities. However, these conditions did not affect a lot to the participants, especially towards their teaching. Limited access to electricity and technology did not kill their creativities in teaching. Ironically, those conditions affect the students' motivation in learning. They gave up easily to the conditions. Logically, the students were used to live with those conditions since they were supposed to be more adaptive in receiving the reality of their surroundings. In fact, the participants who came from big cities in Java were more adaptive than the students.

CONCLUSION

In mapping the current challenges in teaching EFL in Landak, the biggest challenge was on the socio-cultural aspect because the importance of having education especially the sanctity of learning English did not belong to the culture of the society. Showing them a good education would slowly but sure shift the paradigm; this process could be accelerated by the infrastructure development which considered strongly essential to establish a good teaching environment.

Low proficiency of language comprehension, limited resources of materials, communication gap in the classroom, the students' lack of enthusiasm and participation in learning were the minor challenges because pedagogical instruction and learning materials could be wisely created.

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