

Students' Difficulties in Learning English at a State Vocational High School

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Abstract

English in Indonesia is included as foreign language which the differences of the language could causes the difficulties for students to learn. This study aims to find out the difficulties faced by the students in learning English at vocational high school. Vocational High School students are required to have mastery in English, since English mastery is useful to get better carrier or continuing their study. The research question of this research is “what are students’ problems in learning English at a state vocational high school”? The purpose of this research was to find out students difficulties in learning English. The researcher used qualitative research and used descriptive qualitative as research design. The researcher involved eight students in a state vocational high school in Central Java as the participants. The researcher interviewed the participants to obtain the data. The findings of this study showed that there were some problems faced by the students. The problems were lack of motivation, lack of vocabulary, difficulty in memorizing the vocabulary, spelling problems, lack of grammar, anxiety, unsupportive environment, listening problems, and misintonation.

Keywords: English learning, difficulties in English learning, students’ difficulties.

Introduction

As a foreign language learned at schools, English may be considered as difficult language for Indonesian students to learn. Rahayu (2015) stated that the students feel difficult to understand English since the structure of English and Indonesian are different. Therefore, although the students have learned English for a long time, most of them still feel that English is difficult to understand.

Usually, students also apply some strategies in learning English. Rebeca (2000) mentioned that to make students easier, faster, and more enjoyable in learning process, they use strategies when they learn the materials. By using learning strategies, students will be easier in learning process. Learning strategies used by the students are different. Every student has their own strategies. The strategies commonly used by the students are kinesthetic, auditory, and visual learning. The process of learning strategies is when students occupy several resources in order to finish their task with their own way (Williams & Burden 1997). In order to have suitable strategies, it is important for the students to identify their difficulties in learning English.

There are some factors that make students get problems in learning English. The factors may come from the students, the teachers, or the environment. In a research conducted by Kurniawati (2015), the result of the study explains that the factors are divided into two, internal and external factors. Internal factors are physical condition, students' opinion, students' motivation, and learning opportunities. Meanwhile the external factors include the material, teachers and methods, the place and facilities and infrastructures.

Another important reason to know students' problems in learning English is that students themselves have to be aware of their own problems, so they can solve the problems in their learning process. Also, the students should take responsibility for their learning of language (Ivarsson & Pihl, 2013). The students are encouraged to find solutions to problems encountered in learning process. Moreover, identifying students' problems in learning English is necessary. Therefore, based on the phenomena mentioned above, the researcher is interested in conducting a research on students' problems in learning English.

Literature Review

Difficulties in Learning English

Learning English in this study means that students learn together, and there is a teacher who teaches and guides the students in formal class. The teacher gives explanation about English lesson. In the class room, the students do the activities such as following teacher instruction and doing task. Language learning in the class room means there is an interaction between teacher and students. They spend their times for completing certain activity such as giving lesson and doing the task (Chen, 2008).

Ideally, students understand what English lesson is. However, in the process of learning English, the students may face difficulties (Wati, 2011). Some difficulties faced by the students in learning English are having lack of vocabulary mastery, grammatical errors, limited exposure, and anxiety (Arifiani, 2017, (Koizumi & In'nami, 2013, Al-Meklaifi & Nagaratnam, 2011, Pallawa & Alam, 2013, Cheng & Dornyei, 2007, Raju & Joshith, 2017, & Aouatef , 2015). Hence, the explanation of

each problem faced by the students in learning English is explained in the following paragraphs.

Lack of vocabulary. Vocabulary is very important in the language use. In a study conducted by Nanda (2016) found that learning vocabulary does not only understand the meaning and form, but students also have to know how to use the vocabulary in accordance with the context of the sentence they made.

Vocabulary has critical position in speaking skill. Koizumi and In'nami (2013) argued that vocabulary size control a central position in the process of making speech with appropriate meaning. Furthermore, in Koizumi's finding, it was explain that vocabulary size has relationship toward the L2 speaking ability. Kormos (2006) said that there are three main of producing speeches namely, formulation, conceptualism, and articulation. Formulation becomes the first step in making speech which the speaker searches necessary vocabulary from their knowledge to make an utterance. Unfortunately, in this step, Kormos (2006) mentioned that the speakers face difficulty in implementing this process. Thus, the vocabulary size has big influences for the speaker to produce an utterance.

Lack of vocabulary also produces difficulty for the students in reading an English text. This case can make the students get difficulty in understanding the text. That way, the students need to understand enough about vocabulary knowledge in order to understand the text. Fen, Hong, and Amster (2013) found that Taiwanese students who have limited vocabulary size face reading difficulties. To make students easier in understanding the text, the great quality of vocabulary knowledge is needed. It can be concluded that vocabulary and reading cannot be separated.

Lack of vocabulary also becomes the difficulties faced by the students in listening skill. In a study conducted by Ardila (2013), it mentioned that the lack of vocabulary delays the students' listening skill. Besides, the participants in Ardila's research have the same difficulties in listening because they do not know the keywords. Further, when the participants sense unknown word, they start to think about the meaning of the words and sometimes miss the following part of the listening because they stop to listen. Hence, lack of vocabulary will make students' have difficulties in listening skill. Also, the students will miss the information in the following part if they only think about the meaning of unknown words. In conclusion, lack of vocabulary make students' get difficulty in listening skill.

Grammatical error. In a study conducted by Meklafi and Nagaratnam (2011), one of the results in their research is that the students are able to recall the grammar rules, but they still have problem in applying it in an actual communication. From the statement mentioned, it means that the students are able to recall the material, but they cannot apply it in a real communication. However, there are some learners' perceptions of grammatical difficulty presented by Shiu (2011) in her thesis. There are five results of her study, and those are knowledge of syntactic constituents, semantics, pragmatics, previous grammar teaching and learning, and L1 influence.

Syntactic constituent is about the rule of the third person, modal auxiliary, and active and passive voice. The difficulties faced by the learners are to know the English rules and memorize English terms in order to create a correct sentence form. Another difficulty is that when the passive voice involves complex tense-aspect, it can create a difficulty to understand the syntactic constituent. The researcher can

conclude that the learners' problem in syntactic constituent is when the learners have to memorize the rules. Besides, the learners do not only have to memorize the rules but they also have to know how to apply the correct form.

Mispronunciation. Pallawa and Alam (2013) found that although Indonesian English learners have already had experience in learning English, they still have big problem in pronouncing English words. The students get many difficulties in the use English term when they have to pronounce English vocabulary. Besides, many words in English have letters which are not pronounced (Yule, 2001). Thus, Indonesian and English alphabet are exactly similar, but the way to pronounce is totally different.

Brown (2000) found that the second language learners meet some difficulties, because their L1 affects their L2 especially in adulthood. Likewise, mother tongue has big influence toward the students in learning English. In the previous study conducted by Akuli (1983), the main problem in teaching and learning pronunciation result is from the differences in the sound system of English and native language. The statement mentioned is in line with Ellis (1998) who stated that English pronunciation of non-native English speakers is influenced by their native language.

Limited exposure. In language learning, the students need many sources to support their ability. The sources may come from the book or audio providing the knowledge for the students. However, most of English learning process is imperfect. The students may have English book, but they do not know how to read or to understand the text in the book. That way, to support students' pronunciation ability, the students need to get the input from the native speaker. In some cases, students only hear the word from their teacher. Also, the students often get the input from the

unauthentic source which can cause wrong interpretation of the language. Raju and Joshith (2017) stated that students sometimes watch or listen from the unauthentic source which can produce students' misunderstanding to interpret the language well.

Lack of motivation. Cheng and Dornyei (2007) stated that motivation is believed to act an engine of generating learning, and propelling students helps the students to overcome the difficulties encountered in learning foreign language. Besides, Brown (2007) said that motivation as an affective factor plays as central role in learning second or foreign language. According to Cohen (2010), motivation as a dynamic process which is not stable but it is continuous change.

In learning English, not all students have positive attitude when they learn. Some of the students just think about how to pass in this lesson. Also, the students do not have any interest in learning the language. However, the students do not pay attention to the teacher, and they will be easier to forget the lesson given by their teacher (Raju & Joshith, 2017). Hence, the Students who have lack of motivation in learning English will only focus how to pass the course, and they do not interest on how to master English well.

Anxiety. Anxiety is another problem which appears when learning English. Aouatef (2015) stated that anxiety can be described as individual's feeling of nervous, afraid, and worried. The students who learn English have possibility to feel anxiety. Woodrow (2006) argued that in English learning aspect, anxiety truly happens. Besides, the students who feel anxiety in learning English will show some characteristics. Some of the characteristics show that the students feel panic. Some activities which make students panic are when the teacher asks them to read, but they

do not have any idea on how to pronounce the word correctly (Raju & Joshith, 2017). Moreover, panic can appear when students have to answer the question which they do not understand at all (Stawiarska, 2013). Brown (2007) stated that anxiety becomes one of the significant factors in learning second or foreign language. Besides, anxiety has a big potency to become a problem for students in language learning. In other research, Wu (2010) and Zheng (2008) argued that in language education, anxiety becomes a problem since anxiety is a burden for foreign language learning. From the statement mentioned, anxiety is a burden for student in language learning, so it is better for students to overcome the problem.

Methodology

Descriptive qualitative design was adopted in this study, and it was appropriate to reveals the difficulties faced by students in learning English. Eight students from third grade at a state vocational high school in Central Java were selected as the participants. Interview was used in this study.

There were some steps conducted by the researcher in data analysis. The steps used in this research were transcribing the data, member checking, and coding. After gaining the data, the researcher transcribed the audio to make the interview transcript. Creswell (2012) stated that changing audio into text data is called transcribing. After transcribing the data, the researcher conducted member checking. Harper and Cole (2012) stated that member checking is an important step in qualitative research since the participants admit the opportunity to evaluate their words for truthfulness. In order to analyze the data, the researcher conducted the coding. According to Cohen, et al (2012), coding is a simple name that the researcher gives to text that contains of

point or information. The researcher determined the findings of this research based on the results in selective coding.

Findings

The findings reveal nine difficulties faced by students in learning English. They are lack of motivation, lack of vocabulary, difficulty in memorizing vocabulary, lack of grammar mastery, anxiety, unsupportive environment, spelling problems, listening difficulties, and misintonation.

The first finding is lack of motivation. Two participants mention that they felt lazy to learn English since English was difficult. Participant one stated “To be honest, I feel lazy during English lesson in the class”. In line with Beta, Nina said “Since elementary school until now, I am not interested in learning English”. From their statements, it indicated that they got difficulties with their motivation.

The second is lack of vocabulary. Another problem faced by the participants was lack of vocabulary. Some of them mentioned that they faced difficulties because of lack of vocabulary. Nina stated “I got difficulties in speaking because my vocabulary is low.” From the finding above, it could be concluded that lack of vocabulary became the difficulties faced by the students in learning English.

The third is difficulty in memorizing vocabulary. Another problem faced by the students was difficulty in memorizing the word. Beta stated that “I feel difficult in memorizing English vocabulary, and it makes English difficult.” Learning English means that students should know and understand the meaning of the vocabulary. Hence, the students’ difficulty in memorizing the vocabulary make them get problem in understanding the language especially English.

The fourth problem is lack of grammar mastery. Students faced difficulties with the grammar in English. They felt confused to implement the grammar to their activity in learning English. Renata mentioned "I am confused when reading because I do not know the grammar rules". From the statement mentioned, it can be concluded that lack of grammar mastery become the problem in learning English.

The fifth problems is anxiety. Anxiety also became the problem faced by the participants. Some of them felt nervous or afraid to make mistakes when learning English. Anxiety usually became the barrier for the students to learn English. Students could feel anxiety in almost whole English skills. The finding was supported by the participants' statements. Alfa mentioned "I am nervous and afraid of making mistake when I write". From the statement above, it can be concluded that the students still feel anxious in learning language.

The sixth problem is unsupportive environment. Another problem mentioned by the participants was that the environment did not support them in learning process. Caca said "I will lose my concentration if the class is so crowded, and it makes me feel bored to have classroom activity because my class is crowded." It can be summarized that participants have problem with their class environment.

The seventh problem is spelling problems. There were some participants who mentioned that they found spelling difficulties when learning English. Alfa mentioned that "there are some double letters in English, and those make incorrect in writing." English letter and Indonesian letter were different. The differences might cause the problem for the learners.

The eighth problem is listening difficulties. Some participants mentioned that they got difficulties when they had to listen to English conversation. Beta as a participant of this research mentioned that "The speaker speaks too fast; it makes me feel difficult to catch the words". The statements showed that the students get difficulties with the speakers' speed when they speak, and the students have to listen to their speaking.

The last problem is misintonation. Intonation was another problem faced by students when learning English. The third participant said that "The problem like the intonation when I have to speak English". From the statement mentioned, the participant got a problem with the intonation in English.

Discussion

The finding showed that students get difficulties in learning English because of their lack of motivation. Lack of motivation is the most significant difficulty in learning English. Raju and Joshith (2017) stated that lack of interest or motivation in learning English becomes the crucial difficulty. Lack of motivation becomes one of the crucial difficulties in learning English. Lack of motivation influences the students' attitude in the teaching learning process. Students who have a lack of motivation tend to have a negative attitude.

Lack of vocabulary also becomes the difficulty faced by students. The statement was in line with Fen, Hong, and Amster (2013) who found that students who have limited vocabulary size always face reading difficulties. To sum up, the students who have a lack of vocabulary will face many obstacles in learning English. Also, the students find difficulties in writing, listening, speaking, and reading.

Moreover difficulty in memorizing vocabulary also become the difficulties in learning English. Webb and Chang (2012) argued that students face difficulty in memorizing the word and it becomes the common problem appeared. Students also face difficulties in learning English because of their lack of grammar mastery. According to Meklafi and Nagaratnam (2011), one of the results in their research is that the students are able to recall the grammar rules, but they still have problem in applying it in an actual communication. The next difficulties coming from students is anxiety. Wu (2010) and Zheng (2008) argued that in language education, anxiety becomes a problem since anxiety is a burden for foreign language learning.

The other difficulties faced by students is unsupportive environment. This finding was in line with Han and Bridglall (2009) who stated that school which has crowded class room space supports the failure of the students. Accordingly, the students who learn English in crowded situation or in uncondusive class will face problem to learn. Students also got problems that coming from the language it self such as spelling problems. In line with Alfaki (2015) who stated that the spelling problem in writing becomes the familiar problem since the English spelling system which has become inconsistent is complex for students. The next difficulties is listening difficulties. Flowerdew and Miller (1996) asserted that one of students' difficulties in listening is the speed of the delivery in speaking, and students are rarely exposed by the authentic source when they have listening activity. The last difficulties is misintonation. The meaning of a sentence was influenced by the intonation (Shiu, 2011). If a sentence was pronounced by incorrect intonation, the meaning would be different. This statement was in line with Zhang and Yin (2009)

who asserted that the different intonation will influence the meaning of the sentence, the learners often make mistake with the intonation of the sentence when they pronounce the word.

Conclusion

Regarding the findings of the study, there were some difficulties faced by students in learning English. The difficulties came from the students, the environment, and the language. The findings discovered came from the students who were related to the students' lack of motivation, lack of vocabulary, difficult in memorizing vocabulary, lack of grammar mastery, and anxiety. For the second finding, the difficulties came from the environment that was unsupportive environment. In the third finding, the difficulties coming from the language itself also gave the difficulties for the students. Thus, the difficulties faced by the students were about the spelling problem, listening difficulties and misintonation.

Recommendation

Regarding the findings of this research, there are some suggestions for the **students**, based on the finding of the research, the students can understand kind of difficulties that they might face in learning English. Students are able to do some reflection to know what kind of difficulties that happen during learning process. After the students know exactly what their difficulties are, and it is better for students to figure out the strategies to minimize the difficulties. **Teachers.** From this research, the researcher requires and recommends the teachers to give more motivation to the students, so they will have good willingness in learning process. **Institution.** Based on the research findings, the researcher recommends all stakeholders to take

additional information from this research in order to renew the program, syllabus, or curriculum in teaching and learning process in order to overcome the students' difficulties in learning English. **Other researchers.** The researcher recommends for other researchers who want to conduct the similar research to add the factor of the difficulties or the strategies used by the students in learning English.

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