

# ELT at Vocational High Schools in Jember

## A Case Study on Its Relevance to Skill Competences

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### ABSTRACT

The government of the Republic of Indonesia has taken serious concern on the development of vocational high schools (SMK) recently. Various supports and programs are given by the government to realize one of the main purposes of vocational education; to equip the students of vocational high schools with the knowledge and, more importantly, skills in the professional world. The newest is the program of SMK Pusat Keunggulan (Center of Excellence). The program aims to develop vocational high schools with certain skill competences to improve their quality and performance through in-depth partnership and alignment with the business, industry, and professional world. One component to take into consideration in any efforts to develop the quality and performance of vocational high schools is to provide the students with English language teaching that is relevant to their skill competences. In fact, the government states that English is one of the subjects that should be prioritized due to the fact that English communication skill is an aspect that will potentially increase the competitiveness of the graduates in the professional world. Therefore the Directorate of the Development of vocational high school has developed the strategic plan through bilingual learning ecosystem to improve students' English proficiency. This study aims to investigate the implementation of English language teaching at vocational high schools in Jember, specifically the state vocational high schools (SMK Negeri). The case study focuses on how ELT is conducted at the vocational high schools dealing with the materials given to the students with various skill competences. Questionnaires were distributed to English teachers teaching at the state vocational schools to gather information whether or not the materials given to the students vary depending on their skill competences. Furthermore, selected teachers from each school were invited into the interview stage in order to confirm and clarify the responses collected from the questionnaires.

**Keywords:** *ELT, Vocational High Schools, Skill Competences.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English language teaching (ELT) for vocational high school (SMK) has become an interesting topic discussed recently. This is due to the fact that the government of Indonesia has taken serious steps into the development of SMK especially regarding the improvement of students' skill competences. In this case, the government has set several programs as the commitment to realize the programs with the given purposes. Recently, the government launched a program called SMK Pusat Keunggulan (Center of Excellence), in which the schools are expected to improve their quality and performance through in-depth partnerships with business, industry, and professional world.

One of the logical consequences dealing with any programs run to develop SMK, more importantly students' skill competences, is students' improvement in

English proficiency. There is no doubt that students' English proficiency is unquestionably needed in their professional life in the future. Dealing with that, it is important to keep in mind that SMK students have different characteristics and expectations when compared to students of senior high schools (SMA). One major difference between SMK and SMA students is the fact that the SMK students are expected to enter the professional world after graduating. This is, then, safe to state that they need to learn English that can support them in the world of work. It means, they need to master English that can help them communicate with other professionals related to their fields or disciplines.

The Government of the Republic of Indonesia, through the Directorate of the Development of SMK (Direktorat Pembinaan SMK), firmly views English as one of the fields that gets the main priority to be developed considering that the ability to communicate

in English can increase the competitiveness of SMK graduates. Unfortunately, the English language skills of SMK students in general are still far from expectations and have not been able to meet the needs in the world of work. Therefore, the Directorate of Vocational Development has specifically developed a strategy for implementing vocational revitalization through the bilingual learning ecosystem [1] as part of efforts to improve students' English language skills, especially to lead them to compete in the world of work.

In line with the idea above, various efforts to improve the English language skills of SMK students continue to be carried out. One of them is the development of learning multimedia carried out by Surjono and Susila. In their research, they develop multimedia learning English in order to support the achievement of student learning mastery. As a result, students who use multimedia can complete learning by 70% while students who do not use it are only able to achieve completeness of 50% [2].

The explanation above shows that the role of English for SMK graduates is very essential in today's global era. Therefore, joint efforts in providing learning facilities for students in an effort to improve their English language skills deserve more attention from various parties, especially educators and academics. An essential consideration to take into account is that SMK students are suggested to be treated differently regarding the ELT. This is due to the fact that SMK students have different characteristics when compared to SMA students.

Many have argued that ELT in the vocational context, including in SMK, should be presented differently when compared to SMA. In this case, SMA students can be exposed to general English while SMK students should be given more portions in learning and mastering English skills related to their fields of study. For instance, IT students should master more IT-related vocabulary rather than those who are studying agriculture. This also applies to the learning sources presented by the teachers. SMA students, on the other hand, do not need to learn that specific English because, ideally, they will continue their study to the higher level of education. General English is considered more acceptable as they will use English in academic context after the graduation.

The idea is closely related to the concept of English for Specific Purposes or ESP. In this case, the students are exposed to English that is related to their field of study. It means that they can focus on learning English in narrower topics of English [3]; they only focus on studying English materials which are related to their skill competences. By doing so, the ELT at SMK will concern in providing the students with their needs [4]. If the fundamental concept of ESP above is implemented well, there is no doubt that the students will be equipped

with English skills that will be more applicable to be used in their professional life, after the graduation, rather than learning general English.

The question that arises regarding the concept above is whether or not the SMK students are taught in such a way that is considered ideal. This will lead to important insights into how ELT is administered at SMK especially regarding the relevance between English language teaching and students' skill competences. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the ELT at SMK in Jember to reveal whether or not the materials given to the students are relevant to their skill competences.

## 2. METHODS

This study used a qualitative method with a case study design. A case study is a research activity that is carried out intensively and in detail about a phenomenon [5]; in this case, regarding the use of ELT at SMKN in Jember in relevance to students' skill competences. The research was conducted in State Vocational High Schools throughout Jember Regency. There were 8 SMK in Jember. However, only 7 of the schools provided the access to collect the data.

Sources of data in this study were English teachers at State Vocational Schools throughout Jember with 18 respondents. Data instruments used in this study were questionnaire and interview. The Questionnaire was used to collect the data regarding teachers' responses on the statements indicating the materials given to the students with relevance to their skill competences. There were 6 statements that the teachers had to respond covering the information about the English materials given to the students in general, the materials given dealing with the four skills as well as vocabulary.

The interview was conducted as the instrument to support the data collected from the questionnaire. In this case, the interviewees were the English teachers who represented each school. The interviewees were asked to elaborate more about the implementation of ELT at their schools. The focus of the interview was mainly to clarify their responses in the questionnaire. Data collection procedures in this study include reviewing, recording, and processing. Data analysis methods include data classification, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions.

## 3. FINDINGS

Scalar *variables* and *physical constants* should be italicized, and a bold (non-italics) font should be used for **vectors** and **matrices**. Do not italicize subscripts unless they are variables. Equations should be either display (with a number in parentheses) or inline. Use the

built-in Equation Editor or MathType to insert complex equations.

As mentioned previously, questionnaire was the instrument used first for the data collection. In this case, the questionnaire was distributed online by utilizing Google Form. There were 18 teachers from 7 schools responded to the questionnaire.

From the responses on the statements given in the questionnaire, it is shown that the English teachers at SMKN in Jember have provided the students with materials that are relevant to their fields of study. Most of the teachers agreed that they provided relevant materials related to listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary. The results of the data analysis through questionnaire are presented below.

**3.1. Learning materials given to the students are generally related to their skill competences**

The first statement that the respondents had to respond with was “In general, English materials given to the students are relevant to their skill competences.” Of 18 respondents, 15 of them stated that they agreed to the statement. The other 2 respondents somewhat agreed while another 1 disagreed.

**3.2. Learning materials in listening activities are relevant to students’ skill competences**

The next statement that the respondents had to respond was related to the English learning materials in listening activities. There was 1 teacher who strongly agreed to the statement and 14 who agreed. The other 3 respondents chose the same responses in which 2 somewhat agreed and 1 disagreed.

**3.3. Learning materials in speaking activities are relevant to students’ skill competences**

Regarding the learning materials in speaking activities, 2 respondents strongly agreed with the statement stating that the speaking materials were relevant to students’ skill competences. There were 13 teachers who agreed to the statement, 2 somewhat agreed, and 1 disagreed.

**3.4. Learning materials in reading activities are relevant to students’ skill competences**

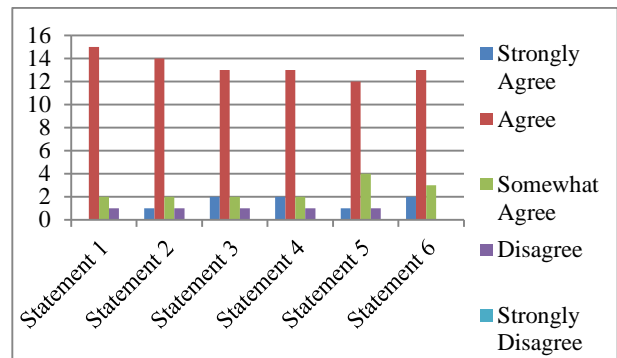
The next statement was the one regarding the relevance of English learning materials in reading activities. In this case, the responses from the respondents show exactly the same answers. There were 2 responses for “Strongly Agree”, 13 for “Agree”, 2 for “Somewhat Agree”, and 1 for “Disagree”.

**3.5. Learning materials in writing activities are relevant to students’ skill competences**

Another statement that the respondents had to respond was related to the learning materials in writing. For this, 1 teacher strongly agreed that the materials were relevant to students’ skill competences, 12 teachers agreed, 4 teachers somewhat agreed, and 1 disagreed.

**3.6. Learning materials in vocabulary learning are relevant to students’ skill competences**

The last statement is related to the learning materials in vocabulary mastery. In this case, there were 2 teachers who strongly agreed to the statement, 13 respondents agreed, and 3 teachers somewhat agreed. There was no teacher who disagreed to the statement.



**Figure 1** English teachers’ responses on questionnaire

On the next stage, after distributing the questionnaire, several English teachers, as the representatives from each school, were contacted to be interviewed. As explained previously, the interview was conducted to get the data regarding ELT at SMKN in dealing with the relevance of the materials and students’ skill competences. It was expected that the data supported the data collected from the questionnaire. In addition, the interview was semi-structured open-ended one that gave both interviewer and interviewee more flexibility in being involved in the process.

After analyzing the interview, in general, the teachers’ explanations through the interview clarified their responses on the questionnaire. Furthermore, teachers’ answers in the interview revealed important insight into the ELT at SMKN regarding the topic being discussed.

According to the teachers’ answers in the interview, it is true that they have provided the students with the materials that are relevant to students’ fields of study. However, it is important to underline that they only provide such relevant materials on possible occasions. It means that they do not provide the relevant materials all the time. This is because they have to keep teaching the

students with the textbook available. For further information, the textbook is the one which is provided by the government so that the teachers should use it for the ELT.

The information above explains the current state of ELT at SMK in Indonesia. According to the teachers through the interview, the ELT at SMK follows the 2013 Curriculum set by the government. It is important to note that there is no difference between ELT at SMK and SMA. It means that the students of SMK are taught general English rather than the one specific to their skill competences. For instance, according to one teacher, the students who are studying agriculture may have to read English texts about tourism. Of course, this phenomenon is far from ideal especially when seen from the perspective of ESP.

The other interesting information regarding the English language teaching at SMKN in Jember is that the students' background becomes one consideration for the teachers in providing the materials. Teachers who teach at schools in the remote area tend to provide students with basic English materials, which belong to the general English, because the students are considered low achievers in English, even from the beginning of their school year. This has made the teachers to lower their, so-called, standards because it is quite impossible to push the students to learn higher-level materials.

The most important information collected from the interview is the fact that students at SMK are still treated the same as the students at SMA. The teachers explained that they had a very limited choice in dealing with the issue. It means, they cannot go further to provide their students with what they really need, in relevance to their fields of study, because the curriculum says the opposite.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Based on the findings, there are several points that can be discussed further. First and foremost, the English teachers at SMKN in Jember have provided their students with English materials that are relevant to their skill competences. In spite of the fact that this comes from the initiation of the teachers themselves, this shows that the teachers are aware that their students need English that is specific to their fields of study.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that in ESP, the ELT should start by considering students' needs regarding the English language. In this case, the need analysis [6] should be conducted by the English teachers to make sure that the students really get what they need to learn. The students can be invited to provide any pieces of information about what they need

to learn in English through a study. In fact, need analysis has been seen as an important part of ELT at SMK since researchers such as Sevrika [7] and Suryadi and Hendra [8] have recently conducted a study under a similar topic.

A good idea regarding the previous concept is to develop learning materials based on students' skill competences. In this case, the teachers are able to cooperate in a focus group discussion [9] to develop the materials. This is very relevant due to the fact that there are similar skills competences at the SMKN in Jember.

The second point that is quite crucial to discuss is the absence of the government in developing ELT curriculum that is relevant to SMK students' skill competences. There is no doubt that the government plays an important role in this area [10] due to the fact that the government has the whole instruments to direct how ELT is taught in schools. In this case, the reasonable step to consider, dealing with the topic being discussed, is to develop an English curriculum for SMK.

#### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This study contributes to the data enrichment regarding the ELT in vocational schools specifically on its relevance to students' skill competences. The data gathered in this study will support the implementation of English for Vocational Purposes at SMK in Indonesia.

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