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Exploring the graduates' perception of English language materials in Vocational High Schools

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ABSTRACT

Instead of continuing their studies, Vocational High School (SMK) students are prepared to work after they graduate. Thus, instead of using general English, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) should be implemented in SMK. However, the National Curriculum in Indonesia decided to teach the same general English content to both SMA (General High School) and SMK. The purpose of this study is to see how SMK graduates feel about the EFL materials they received at SMK. This research involved three SMK graduates as participants. This investigation yielded three recommendations. First, ESP resources should be incorporated to the English topic in SMK without omitting the need for general English materials. Second, SMK classroom activities should place a greater emphasis on practical communication. Third, extensive reading and/or listening activities should be implemented in SMK.

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1. Introduction

Today, students' needs in English are not focused only on skills such as listening, reading, writing, speaking English fluently, but also on the ability to communicate in a way which can be understood and appreciated by their future colleagues in the working environments (Medrea & Rus, 2012). Vocational High School (SMK) prepares their students to have jobs after graduating rather than to continue to higher education. Teaching English in SMK is different from teaching English in General High School (SMA). In SMK, the objective is to get the students able to take part in the work field (Cahyati et al., 2015).

Sukarni (2020) stated that although SMK students can choose to continue their education, most of them prefer to find a job after they graduate, while only 36.2% of them want to continue their study. However, the English language materials they receive during their years in school are not specialized to their future job environments. Materials in general communication, such as greetings, leaving messages, expressing feelings, and expressing regret, demonstrate that the lesson topic is not determined by vocational school majors (Cahyati et al., 2015). Almost all of them made essentially the same statement, and it is frequently heard from students that mostly they have low motivation to learn English, for a variety of reasons, one of which is that they do not consider language to be important for future employment (especially for non-tourism major students). Additionally, teachers claimed that their academic input is limited (Ratnadewi, 2016).

Indonesian national curriculum (Kurikulum Nasional) is a textbook-driven curriculum. This risks making teachers not creative when in fact they are expected to be creative and innovative (Nur & Madkur, 2014). Teachers at SMA use government-published textbooks. Because the learning materials in general high school and SMK are the same, SMK lessons also employ general English.

Previous research believes that general English is important for vocational school students. SMK students should be equipped with general language skills before they are ready to practice the specialized terminology which they are expected to master once they start their working life (Medrea & Rus, 2012).

Furthermore, another research also perceived that the book published by the national curriculum is appropriate enough for SMK students. The textbook was well-designed and encouraged students' autonomy to learn and use the language (Tyas & Safitri, 2019). The teachers considered that the textbook suited both the students' and teachers' need, syllabus, and national examination. In using the textbook, the teachers might modify tasks, adding, and omitting certain parts to make an adaptation on the textbook to make it suit their students better.

This study aims to examine SMK graduates' view on EFL materials they receive at SMK whether it is appropriate for their demands for their jobs. The gap that is expected to be filled is how SMK graduates view their English learning during their study and how they perceive English language subject in SMK should be. This study may contribute in later identification of essential adjustments to the national curriculum.

2. Method

This study used descriptive qualitative research design by conducting interviews as the instrument to obtain the data. A question was raised on *Quora Indonesia* site asking for opinions about English language subject in SMK with the keywords English language and SMK. *Quora* is a popular Question and Answer (Q&A) site which provides users with the ability to tag questions with multiple relevant topics which helps to attract quality answers (Mathew et al., 2020). It is a platform to interact with people who contribute insights and answers.

Responding to the question, four Quorans posted their answers 27-28 December 2021. Their profile were then observed to get qualified participants for the research. The participants of the re-

search have to be SMK graduates and had at least two years experience of working. One of the respondents did not write his education background and did not respond direct messages sent to him. For that, this one respondent is excluded from the research.

The other three participants, Sani, Kawaki, and Dori, were SMK graduates and currently work for their jobs in Indonesia. Sani graduated in 2010 and currently lives in Magelang. Kawaki graduated in 2012 and currently lives in Bandung. While Dori graduated in 2018 and currently lives in Tasikmalaya. After collecting the first set data, interviews were conducted through direct messages on *Quora* to get deeper understanding.

3. Results and discussion

All participants consider EFL learning materials they had in SMK as a repetition of what they received from their Junior High School study. They argued that the topics they received for learning English were not specified for their current jobs. However, they consider that the general English materials rather than the specific ones are necessary for some SMK students. It is suggested that some students needed those materials to learn English further (see transcription 1). When they enrolled at SMK they got different levels of English competence. Furthermore, not all SMK graduates applied for jobs that require them to be able to speak English (see transcription 4).

Participants perceived that not all language skills and components need to be taught to SMK students. If they could choose to prepare themselves for the work environment, they preferred to learn more practical English communication in speaking and listening activities (See transcription 2).

Transcription 1.

Interviewer - Do you think English taught in SMK is appropriate to get you prepared for your job?

Sani - I don't believe so; the English taught in school can be categorized as repetition (the same as Middle Schools) as if there is no improvement. Because I believe English is simple to learn if you practice speaking English practically. If it is possible, (English subject at school should be) half theory and half practice. However, if the students are lazy, it will be tough. It is better to discuss a different topic at each meeting so that the students don't get bored.

Transcription 2.

Interviewer - How different do you feel English taught in SMK from English used for your job?

Dori - You mostly learn grammar and mechanics in SMK. While for a working environment, you need English for practical communication.

It is also suggested that when some SMK students are motivated to learn English, either for their future jobs or only for fun, they tend to learn English outside of the class. They perceived that it is better to dive into an English speaking environment rather than only learn English from schools (See transcription 3).

Transcription 3.

Interviewer - If English taught in SMK doesn't help you very much, then how do you learn English to get prepared for your job?

Sani - Personally, I like to learn English on my own from the internet; (like) YouTube or podcasts.

Kawaki - Depending on your interests, you can also hunt for an international community. There was once Skype, and now there is Discord today.

Surprisingly, the participants do not consider that the lack of ESP materials plays a crucial role in students' learning motivation and language achievements. They consider that even if students' future jobs require them to have English language competence, general English is appropriate enough (See transcription 4).

Transcription 4.

Interviewer - Do you think changing English materials in SMK (into ESP) can help you get better prepared for your job?

Kawaki - (Chuckles). Let's say, when you get an interview at an e-commerce company (in Indonesia), you will find out that practically everything from applying to offering (the job) is spoken in English, unless you speak Mandarin too. But they know that in high school you don't learn English to prepare for work. So, I guess it is not.

The participants considered that the learning activities should simulate their future job environment. They perceived that providing suitable learning activities should be prioritized instead of developing specific teaching materials.

Not all general English materials for SMK should be substituted to ESP materials. Ardinal and Anwar (2021) suggested that several topics are still needed to be put into the current syllabus and to be developed for hospitality majors. However, general English materials are needed for some students to improve their English competence for daily communication. A research by Chan (2021) suggested that inadequate levels of English proficiency might cause graduates to encounter difficulties in their work environments besides the knowledge of their fields. In vocational schools, ESP materials might be necessary. However, general English is crucial to prepare the students for English speaking working environments.

ESP materials specified to SMK students' subject fields might increase their learning motivation. However, they do not consider it as the most important thing dealing with their learning motivation. It is not only the topics that affect their learning motivation, but also the learning approach, method, and activities. Previous studies by Mentari (2015) and Haryanti (2019) suggested that the students and the teacher need the textbook which contains the ESP to supply the students skills based on their program to prepare the students to enter the workplace. But considering that the graduates used various strategies to learn workplace communication and solve language-related problems (Chan, 2021), ESP coursebooks should not be the top priority to improve students' learning motivation and language achievement.

Besides topics and materials, language skills they are going to use in their future jobs should be considered. Kennedy (1983) stated that ESP is not only about the materials but also the teaching activities. Providing an interesting learning tool also proved to be significantly improved students' satisfaction in ESP classes (Lailiyah & Putra, 2022) and students' behavioral engagement (Afendi et al., 2020). In addition, the better textbook does not guarantee students to achieve better English performance. A research by Diniah (2013) concluded that there were two main difficulties faced by teachers in using textbooks in classrooms; the level of difficulties of the materials and limited aids for teaching. Thus, ESP coursebook development is not the only option to improve Vocational students' English achievement.

SMK students should be given more time for practical communication within their English class. When they are prepared to get jobs after they graduate rather than to continue their study, it is better to prepare them for practical communication rather than developing general skills and language mechanics. This confirms a suggestion proposed by Sukarni (2020) that the policy maker in SMK curriculum developer should add teaching hours for English subject so that learners have more learning period to learn and practice English for communication. However, it does not mean that the students have to spend more time at school.

Extensive reading and listening activities might be a good solution to deal with students' learning motivation. As it is said by the participants, they prefer to dive into English language communication they can find outside the classrooms. Thus, in the classrooms they just need to report their extensive reading and/or listening to assess. A research by Iftanti (2012) stated that The EFL students read English for some purposes, including for school assignments, for pleasure, and for knowledge and English skills improvement. Language exposure outside of the classrooms can help students learn English without extending the class period.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, this research resulted in three suggestions. First, ESP materials should be added to English subject in SMK without omitting general English materials. Second, classroom activities in SMK should be more focused on practical communication. Third, extensive reading and/or listening activities should be implemented. In addition, this study uses *Quora* as the media to collect the data. Unlike the other social media, *Quora* is not quite popular platform in Indonesia. The participants might not represent the majority of Vocational School graduates in Indonesia. Further research with

more participants should be conducted to confirm the result of this study. It is also suggested for future studies to conduct further research to observe the practicality of these proposed suggestions.

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