

# The Problems of Applying Student Centered Syllabus of English in Vocational High Schools in Kendal Regency

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## Abstract

This study was descriptive qualitative study aimed to investigate the problems of applying student centered syllabus in vocational high schools in Kendal regency, Central Java, Indonesia. The subjects of the study were twenty English teacher in vocational high schools in Kendal. The data were collected through observations, questionnaires, and interviews. The collected data further were analyzed using inductive analysis in which the researchers looked for the pattern of the data and the meaning of the data. Based on the data, there are three points concluded. The first was the English teaching and learning process in vocational high schools in Kendal had applied the student-centered syllabus. The second, in designing the students-centered syllabus the teachers found difficulties in having a model of the student-centered syllabus as a guideline in adapting and designing their own syllabus, describing the learning indicators, and formulating learning activities alligned with the student-centered learning. The third, the teachers faced difficulties in terms of encouraging their students to participate actively during the teaching and learning, and requiring a lot of time in implementing the student-centered syllabus. Thus, even though the teachers had already applied the student-centered syllabus in their teaching, they still found difficulties in implementing it. In conclusion, they need a model of student-centered syllabus for being a guideline in designing their syllabus and workshops to train them the ways to implement the student-centered syllabus successfully in their teaching.

**Keywords:** student centered syllabus, vocational high schools

## 1. Introduction

A paradigm shift occurred in the educational field such as in the form of teaching learning approach in which shifted from a teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning has become a major issue in education. This shift becomes one of the trends in global higher education (UNESCO, 2009). A teacher-centered learning is regarded as one of the factors causing the low participation of students in the teaching and learning process. The teacher-centered learning regards the teachers as the source of knowledge that the students have to pay attention to which resulted in the silent and lack of interactions during the process of teaching and learning. The classroom condition is dominated by solely the teacher explaining the lesson materials to the students with low interaction in the form of discussions between the teacher and the students. Whilst the teacher explains the material in front of the class, the students tend to be passive and ask question if they are given the opportunity to do so. Thus, the teacher centered learning is lack of giving opportunity to the students to have interactions in class. However, the shifting from teacher-centered learning to the student-centered learning sheds light to the new paradigm of teaching that promotes students interaction during the teaching and learning process.

Tani (2005) found that the students in Asian countries tend to be quiet during the process of teaching and learning for fear of making a mistake. The “culture of silence” is also increasingly thickened with the teacher assessments which see only black and white/ wrong or right towards the students. As a result, the students tend to have low participation in the process of teaching and learning and are well positioned as the “only” knowledge receiver” in the classroom that makes them less able to think critically. There is also a culture arisen from the teacher-centered learning which produces the characters of good students. The characters of good students are

highly associated to the students who quietly pay attention to the teacher's explanation during the lesson, do not ask many questions and in the end the students could get a good grade on the test. This happens not only from the teacher's perspective but from the students as well. As the consequence, the students think that they will be regarded as good students if they are quiet during the lesson. This fact lead to the classroom situation which tend to have low participation during teaching learning process. It indicates that most educators in Asia, including Indonesia, still adopt a teacher-centered learning in their teaching.

In Indonesia, the implementation of the teacher-centered learning is still much going on many subjects including English even tough it has shifted the learning paradigm from the teacher-centered to the student-centered as demanded by the current curriculum, 2013 curriculum. This condition occurs because Indonesia has long history of implementing the teacher-centered learning. During the early curriculum of Indonesia which focused more on the memorization of the lesson instead of seeking understanding of the lesson from various contexts. During the 1994 curriculum, the students were focused on the receptive traits rather than the productive ones as shown from the materials used in the process of teaching and learning at that time which emphasized more on grammar and reading which goal was to be able to pass the national examination. This happened for decades thus it made the culture of the learning English tend to solely for understanding grammar and understanding text. Going further to the 2004 curriculum known as KBK (Competence based Curriculum), the students were started to be exposed with more on the productive traits so both traits were considerably equal. However, in the practice, the teaching and learning process was seen to be still in the teacher-centered condition.

However, Kember (2000) asserts that students in Asian countries have the ability to understand a lesson in depth if they are given the chance to interact with their teacher and peers. In this case the teacher should change their role from dominating classes to facilitating learning for their students. Exposing students more to interact with others is in line with the sociocultural theory which emphasizes students' interaction as important part in their learning development (Aimin, 2013; Eun, 2010). This condition can only be achieved by applying the student-centered learning. By having the opportunity to explore and discuss more on the lesson using their own thinking, the students will grasp the lesson more comprehensively. Although within the teacher it lays a knowledge that has been considered as the "right knowledge" students should accept, keeping it from the students until they make conclusion related to the lesson will make them gain more understanding towards the lesson. However, the teacher should never let students go out of the context of the lesson so the students are permitted only to find the knowledge available as far as it still in the context of the lesson. It is to make sure the students do not go to the different path as the teacher wants. This condition surely promotes critical thinking to the students because they are trained to think more on the lesson than only listen it from the teacher. By being able to think critically, hopefully the students can improve their understanding towards the lesson more significantly.

The English language that in fact is a universal language should be seen as a bridge to equitable education with other countries. Yet, with a variety of reasons caused a learning approach that still being practiced is more on teacher centered learning, teaching and learning the English language could be said to have not yet achieved the desired success standards (Darjowidjojo, as cited in Kirkpatrick, 2010). Therefore, related to the sociocultural theory which focus more on students' interaction, the teaching and learning of English should also promotes in students' interaction. This is in line with the theory of second language acquisition that by having more interaction with their peers in context of learning English, students will improve their language development both in oral or written abilities (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Lei, 2008; Razfar, Khisty, & Chval, 2011). Therefore, the challenge for English language educators at every level of education (elementary, junior, senior/vocational, or even college) is to make this shift successfully in English education.

Based on the national education system (2003), educators play an important role to make the learning meaningful, interesting, creative, dynamic, and interactive. This leads to a student-oriented learning in which students are considered as the main actor in the classroom activities. Such learning is also expected to encourage students to become independent learners, especially for vocational school students who are indeed projected to work after graduation. Therefore, vocational school students need to be given the opportunity to participate in the process of teaching and learning including English subjects so that they are able to project the knowledge in the world of work.

One of the crucial aspects influencing the implementation of the student-centered learning is the syllabus used by the teachers. The teachers should design their syllabus representing the student-centered learning because the syllabus becomes the guideline for them in doing their teaching. By designing the syllabus which already emphasize more on students, the teachers will likely to have guideline in their shifting from the teacher-centered learning to student centered learning. Thus, it is important to look at the teachers' difficulties in implementing the

syllabus that affects the success of the shifting to the student-centered learning.

The fact that the most of English teachers have difficulties in shifting their teaching from a teacher-centered to a student-centered learning became the point of consideration of conducting this research. This research was carried out to find out the problems occurred during the implementation of the student-centered syllabus in the English language subject for vocational school students in Kendal regency, Central Java, Indonesia. Kendal regency was chosen as the site of the study because there have been blossoming industrial manufacturers demanding high proficient workers in their field and English language skills. In the next four years, Kendal is projected as *Kawasan Industri Kendal (KIK)* – Kendal Industrial Area. Thus the vocational high school students with high competencies in their field and English language skills are highly needed to cope with the high demand of industrial workers in Kendal regency. By investigating the problems related to the implementation of the student-centered syllabus, the teachers and the stake holders could look for the solutions for the problems so the student-centered learning could be successfully implemented in English teaching so that the vocational high schools' students have high level proficiency in English language skills.

### 1.1 Student Centered Learning

Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) assert that one of the indicators of quality learning is an occurrence of valuable interactions or in other words is two-way interactions between teachers and students. This interaction will not happen if the teachers dominate the class and considers himself as the main learning resources in the classroom. "Teachers don't always have to have wider knowledge than the students," (Cheng 2000). The teacher is not the only source of learning in the classroom, students can become another source of learning in the classroom and can contribute to knowledge sharing.

On this student-centered learning, teachers change their role from an expert to be a facilitator. They facilitate students to become the main actor in learning. With this condition, the students are changed their role from passive become active (the main actor of learning). Of the various research results, this role change makes students more actively engaged in learning and comfortable (Freeman, et al., as cited in Brekelmans et al., 2011), highly motivated (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), and more interested in the subject (Curby et al., as cited in Brackett et al., 2011). According to Meyer and Jones (1993: 21), this student-oriented learning allows students to further explore the matter and also actively ask.

Compared with the teacher-centered learning which activities are the transfer of knowledge, the student-centered learning tends to emphasize on "research and discovery". The teacher presents a question or problem, then he facilitates the students to respond to the question (Pedersen & Liu, 2003: 58). In other words, the students have the opportunity to explore critical issues (Dewey, as quoted in Saye & Brush, 2000: 80). In this case, the students do not only receive knowledge, but also try to share their individual perspectives towards the subject matter based on the knowledge they have. This type of learning can motivate students to engage actively in class discussions. As stated by Bellack et al., in Walsh (2006: 107), that "the activities of the giving and receiving of discourse is a means to build a shared space, which serves to give the opportunity to 'try out' their own ideas as well as offering their own perspective." Then, students are not considered as passive recipients of knowledge with the teacher as the primary source of knowledge but they are the main actor in the learning that has an opportunity to offer, try out their ideas, and also analyze an issue during the process of teaching and learning.

### 1.2 Student-Centered Syllabus

The syllabus is the basic essential in the teaching and learning process because in the syllabus, there is information about what is taught and how to teach it in the class. Sinor and Kaplan (2010) said that the syllabus connecting teachers and students provides the information needed by students about their learning activity. Basically, the syllabus includes some information related to school subjects, such as (1) basic information about lessons, (2) information on the basic commands, (3) the materials and equipment needed, (4) outline of learning, and (5) the expected results of the activities of learning.

In making the syllabus, apart from paying attention to the five things over, the teacher should also consider what type of syllabus in accordance with learning objectives. Some of the existing syllabus types including structural syllabus, circumstantial syllabus, topical syllabus, functional syllabus and skills syllabus (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Teachers should choose a syllabus based on their needs in teaching.

Student centered learning also first need to be planned in the syllabus. The teachers should choose learning activities that focus on the students instead of the teacher so the students have many chances to participate during the teaching and learning. The syllabus has to be clear in terms of the learning goals, materials, activities, and assessments. By having the clear plan, teacher can easily implement the lesson based on the syllabus. This

student-centered syllabus plays as a guideline for teacher in implementing student-centered learning in their classroom.

### *1.3 Vocational School*

According to the 2007 KTSP curriculum, Vocational High School (SMK) is the secondary schools equal to Senior High School (SMA). It is said to be equal because both types of schools are equally a continuation of the first level of secondary school, and accomplished in three years. However the goals of vocational high schools are different to senior high schools. The followings are the differences of the goals of vocational high schools and senior high schools.

- a. Senior high school is intended for students to go to college after graduation, while vocational high school is intended for students who want to work and move on to college.
- b. The curriculum of senior high school is more on the theory than practice; on the contrary, the vocational high school's curriculum is more on the practice than theory.
- c. Judging from the curriculum, the senior high school graduates are not trained to be ready to work, while the vocational high school graduates are educated to work and be independent.
- d. Seen from the place of learning, senior high school students learn in school, whereas the students of vocational high school learn in school as well as in the world of work (internship).

In the government regulation 17/2010 article 76 also states that vocational education serves among other things to equip learners with the knowledge and technology as well as vocational skills of the professions in accordance with the needs of the community. From this article, we can understand that the students of vocational high school are prepared to enter the world of work, which requires them to have a competence of the profession in accordance with the vocational and personal competencies that make them able to survive and succeed in the workforce. One of the elements in personal competence is the ability to communicate, what is meant here is the ability to communicate in the world of work with colleagues. Therefore, Indonesian and English are given as compulsory subjects in vocational high school, and foreign language subjects (other than English) are given as local content subjects. (the government regulation 19/2005).

It is clear that the vocational high school students are prepared for the work right after they finish their school. Different with the senior high school students who need to attend college first before they are able to utilize them in the field of work, the vocational high students do not actually need to attend the college since they are already equipped with sufficient ability to survive in the field of work. Thus, seeing this situation, in order to deliver maximum knowledge to the students, the school itself should accommodate them with the real experience of the field of work. Not only solely from the internship, but also from the classroom the students should get the best experience they can get to be able to make them ready to contribute in the society. In short, the vocational high school should experience the students in the real life of work by having them able to grasp knowledge by themselves. Thus, in this case, the student-centered learning is highly needed to be applied in this particular school.

In the context of English language, promoting students' interaction more will benefit the students in their language development. Thus, implementing the students-centered English syllabus in vocational high school is essential for the students to cope with the need of being ready to compete in the field of work.

## **2. Method**

In accordance with the goal of this study to investigate the problems occurred in the implementation of the student-centered syllabus, this study was designed in the form of descriptive qualitative study employing observations, questionnaires, and also interviews with the English teachers of vocational high school in Kendal regency.

The subjects of the study were twenty English teachers in vocational high schools in Kendal. In collecting the data, observations, questionnaires and interviews were used in this study. The data obtained from the observations, questionnaires, and interviews were used to get the idea on how the teachers implemented the student centered syllabus in the vocational high school in Kendal regency. The questionnaires consisted of twenty questions mainly focused on: (1) the teachers' opinion towards the student centered syllabus, (2) the problems faced during the process of designing the student-centered syllabus, and (3) the problem in the implementation of the student-centered syllabus in their classroom. Then, to get more detailed data of the implementation of student centered syllabus, the interviews were conducted with three teachers who were chosen by random sampling. Thus, the data from the interviews played as the supplementary data to support the

data collected from the observations and the questionnaires. By identifying the data then it can be concluded the problems faced by the teachers so that the solutions can be formulated in order to make the implementation of the student-centered syllabus run appropriately.

The data obtained then were analyzed using inductive analysis based on Burns (2010) and Hatch (2002) to get the detailed picture of the problems occurred during the implementation of the student-centered syllabus. In inductive analysis, the researchers developed categories representing the patterns in the data. Based on Hatch (2002) there were five steps in analyzing the data employing in this study including data reduction, coding, data classification, data tabulation, and data description and interpretation. In reducing the data, the researchers assembled the data by reflecting to the research questions on the data, and examining the data to look for broad patterns addressing the research questions. Then, the data were coded thoroughly to see what categories emerged from the data. So, in this step, the data were divided into more specific categories. Next, the categories were counted in terms of percentage of each category to get numerical data to enrich the analysis in this study. Further, the data were described and interpreted by thinking what the data mean by reflecting beyond the percentage, looking for the ideas or concepts representing the data, and identifying and developing explanations of the connections with the research questions. Then, based on the results of analysis, the researchers drew a conclusion to answer the research questions investigated in this study.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 The Profile of the Teachers

In this study, the data collection were used the survey system through the questionnaires and interviews. The subject of the study were English teachers in vocational high school in Kendal regency. Based on data from MGMP (Subject's Teachers Discussion) of the English teachers, the number of vocational high schools in Kendal which joined the MGMP are fifty schools. The questionnaires were spread in all the fifty schools, however, the questionnaires which were submitted to the researcher were twenty pieces. Thus, the teachers involved in this study were twenty English teachers from vocational high schools in Kendal. The interviews were taken during the MGMP session in SMKN 3 Kendal.

The subject of the research consists of twenty English teachers of vocational high schools in Kendal regency with various educational backgrounds ranging from bachelor's degree to master's degree. The following is a profile of English language teachers of vocational high school in Kendal regency who became the subject of this study.

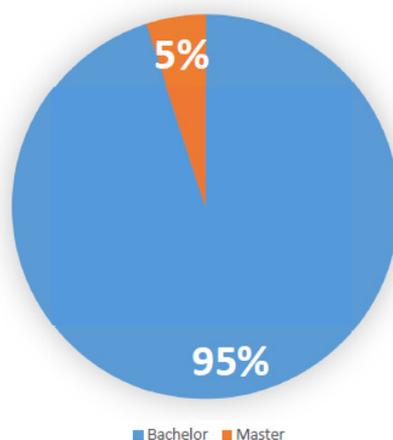


Figure 1. The educational background range of English language teachers of vocational high schools in Kendal regency

The majority of English language teachers in Vocational high school in Kendal (95%) are bachelors while 5% of the teacher has completed their master degree. Teaching experience of the teachers also varied, ranging from one year up to 29 years. The majority of teaching experience in the subject of the research is between 4-10 years (65%), while the teacher with less than 4 years of experiences is 15% from the population, and experienced teachers who teach more than 10 years ranges from 20% of the total teacher who became the subject of this research.

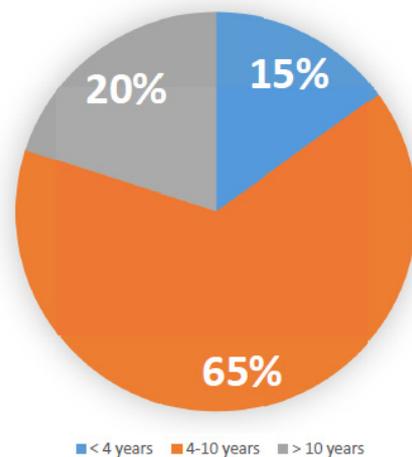


Figure 2. The experience range of English language teachers of vocational high schools in Kendal regency

From these data, it can be concluded that teachers who have taught for more than ten years (20%) and 4-10 years (65%) went through the shift of the curriculum from the teacher-centered to the student-centered learning. Most of the teachers have quite a long experience in teaching. The experience in teaching is essential for teachers that by having more experiences, they will have more knowledge on how they facilitate the students with various characteristics and needs. The subject of the study seem to have quite long experience in teaching which resulted in the deeper data can be gathered related to the problem they faced during the implementation of student centered syllabus.

### 3.2 English Teaching and Learning Process in Vocational High Schools in Kendal

Based on the results gathered from the observations, questionnaires, and interviews with the teachers and students, there are some points concluded related to the English teaching and learning process occurred in vocational high schools in Kendal. First, most of the teachers regarded syllabus as the important aspect in their teaching. 20% teachers stated that the syllabus was a very important in their teaching, 70% teachers stated it was important, whereas 5% teachers stated they were neutral towards this question, and 5% teachers stated it was not an important thing in teaching and learning process. By looking at this percentage, the most of the teachers agreed that the syllabus played a crucial role in their teaching so they had to design their syllabus thoroughly to help them in their teaching.

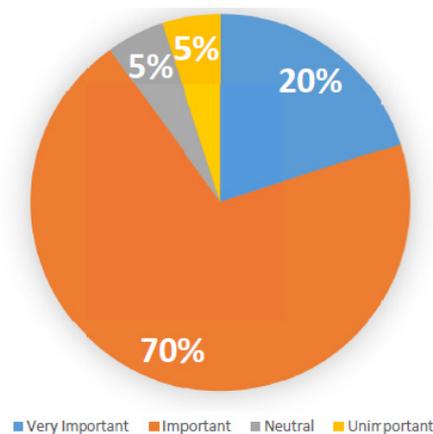


Figure 3. The teachers' opinion on the importance of the syllabus

Second, the majority of the teachers had a sufficient knowledge related to students-centered learning as shown by their answers in the interviews and the questionnaires. 65% of the teachers got a lot of information about the students centered learning from various sources such as seminars, workshops, books, and colleagues.

They understood that in the student-centered learning they were not allowed to dominate the teaching and they had to be facilitator during the teaching and learning. This knowledge became their modal in implementing the student-centered learning.

Third, most of the teachers in vocational high schools in Kendal had already applied the student-centered learning during their teaching because they had an understanding that applying student-centered learning is important in their class to make their students to be more active learners. The application of the student-centered learning is aligned with the demand of the current curriculum, 2013 curriculum, in which the 2013 curriculum demands the teachers to conduct their teaching and learning process based on the student-centered learning. They are demanded to shift their teaching from the teacher-centered to the student-centered learning.

Most of the teacher (55%) stated that implementing the student-centered learning in their class is very important and they agreed that it could encourage their students to participate actively during the teaching so they could master English well. However, in its application, they found difficulties in the process of teaching and learning that affected the results of the teaching and learning itself. Most of their students were still passive during the learning which made them to talk more in class to help the students understand the materials. This situation resulted in the condition of the teaching and learning that more focussed in the teacher instead of the students, thus the teacher had not successfully implemented the student-centered learning in their class.

In short, even though the teachers have already had a good understanding related to the student-centered learning, they still found difficulties in implementing it in their teaching.

### *3.3 Problems in Designing the Student-Centered Syllabus*

There were three problems in terms of designing the student-centered syllabus. The first problem is the lack of samples of the student-centered syllabus as the model for the teachers in designing their own syllabus. This problem is related to the planning of the teaching in which they found difficulties in designing the student-centered syllabus. The majority of the students (60%) stated that they needed a lot of samples of student-centered syllabus as the guidelines in designing their own syllabus. Thus, because they had limited samples of student-centered syllabus as the guidelines, 50% teachers stated that they more often designed the teacher-centered syllabus instead of student-centered syllabus. In fact, syllabus is a crucial aspect in teaching and learning because it describes the teacher's planning for their teaching. If they still designed their syllabus in teacher-centered point of view, they would also apply the teacher-centered learning in their class.

The second problem is the teachers did not very detail in describing the learning indicators in their syllabus. From the collected syllabus from the teachers, the teachers tended to make general indicators which were difficult to assess, so they needed to be more specific in formulating their indicators related to the standard competence of the subject. They need to be more detailed in describing the learning indicators for the lesson because these indicators as the standard whether the teaching is successful or not.

The third problem is the teachers divided the learning activities based on the language skills resulting they needed a lot of time if they applied the syllabus. They divided their teaching process into listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills differently. It would be better and need less time if they apply integrated skills in their teaching so for example listening and speaking or reading and writing are taught at the same time.

In brief, most of the teachers had already designed the student-centered syllabus but they still found difficulties in having lack of models of the student-centered syllabus, describing detail indicators, and formulating the learning activities.

### *3.4 Problems in Implementing the Student-Centered Syllabus*

In implementing the student-centered syllabus, there were two problems that the teachers faced. The first is the teachers found difficulties in encouraging their students to be active during the teaching and learning. 55% teachers stated that their students were very difficult to encourage to participate actively in the teaching process. Similarly, based on the interview, they also stated that the difficulty in referring the students to be active in the process of learning seemed to be a mean obstacles in the successful application of the student-centered learning. They stated that when they were implementing the student-centered syllabus and asked the students to discuss and work on an issue, there were only one or two students who did the tasks whereas the other students did not pay any attention or cheated on their work if they had done the tasks. Learning finally focused on one or two students who were active during the teaching, while the other students were just quiet or even cheated the other students' works.

The students tend to be passive in the English teaching due to the long historical records regarding the implementation of the teacher-centered learning so the students were not accustomed to participate actively

during the teaching and learning. The students are regarded as the recipients from their teacher without given many opportunities to participate. However, since 2004, with the implementation of the 2004 curriculum, the students were encouraged to be active learners and the teachers were asked to provide more opportunities for them to participate. Although it has been more than ten years of the application of the student-centered learning, the teachers were still hard-pressed to encourage their students to participate actively during the lesson. This reality happens in the learning process in most of vocational high schools in Kendal. Therefore, more efforts are required from the teachers to push their students more actively in the learning process.

The second is that 60% teachers needed a lot of time in implementing the student-centered syllabus. However, in fact they had a lot of units in a semester to be taught to their students in order to make them able in doing the summative assessments at the end of the semester. Thus, they worried if they applied the student-centered syllabus in every meeting, they would not have enough time to finish teaching all the materials. Moreover, they had an opinion that the reason why a lot of teachers tended to use the teacher-centered syllabus because it was simpler and more practical. They had just explained the materials and then asked the students to do the exercises related to the materials.

In short, the teachers had difficulties in encouraging the students to participate actively in the teaching and learning process and allocating the time for teaching a lot of materials for their students in a semester.

#### 4. Conclusion

Student centered syllabus is a breakthrough for teachers to switch to methods of teaching which emphasize more on student learning activities. Switching to an emphasis upon student's activities is expected to give a positive impact to students especially in regards to how they process the information obtained in the process of learning to then become additional knowledge for them. From this research it can be concluded several points, first, the English teachers in vocational high schools in Kendal already had adequate knowledge on how to compose a student-centered syllabus and had applied the student-centered syllabus in their class. However, entering the second points, there were several obstacles faced by teachers in designing the student-centered syllabus and applying it in their teaching. In designing the student-centered syllabus, the teachers found difficulties in having a model of the student-centered syllabus as a guideline in adapting and designing their own syllabus, describing the learning indicators, and formulating learning activities aligned with the student-centered learning. They found problems especially in the adjustment of materials and activities for teaching in the classroom. The various majors of vocational high school force the teachers to innovate in tailoring the English material to fit to the students' majors in their school. In terms of implementing the student-centered syllabus, the teachers faced difficulties encouraging their students to participate actively during the teaching and learning, and requiring a lot of time in implementing the student-centered syllabus whereas in fact they have to teach a lot of units in a semester. Thus, even though the teachers had already applied the student-centered syllabus in their teaching, they still found difficulties in implementing it. In conclusion, there was a highly need of a model of student-centered syllabus for being a guideline in designing their syllabus so they can design and adapt their syllabus matched with their students needs in vocational high schools. Moreover, they also need a teacher development program such as seminars and workshops to train them the ways to implement the student-centered syllabus successfully in their teaching with the majority of the students were passive during the lessons.

#### 5. Suggestion

Additional support from the government and the school is highly needed in terms of the implementation of student centered syllabus. This support may take in the form of the workshops starts from how to design a student-centered syllabus and how to implement it in various classroom conditions and characteristics. Moreover, it also essential to have a data bank consists of various examples of the student-centered syllabus from all subjects in general and especially from English for vocational high schools so it can be guidelines for the teachers on how to design the appropriate and an effective student-centered syllabus.

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