

Teaching English for Specific Purposes in Vocational High School: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract

This study reports the result of a qualitative case study research design. This study aims to explore teachers' beliefs about teaching English for Vocational school, to investigate how those beliefs are reflected in classroom practices, and to explore that affect the shaping of teachers' beliefs in the teaching and learning process. The participant of this study were six English teachers from three different vocational high schools in Majenang. The data was taken using a semi-structured interview, documentation, and classroom observation. Then the data was analyzed using line by line analysis. Teaching English in Vocational High School is believed different from Senior High school (SHS) as it belongs to English for specific purposes (ESP) and demands different knowledge of material, method, and strategies. The result shows that the teacher's beliefs are not always realized in their classroom practices for a variety of potential reasons. The inconsistency between belief and practices are related to various factors, including class density, time constrains, incompatibility of the assigned text-books, huge workload, and students need.

Keywords: *classroom practices, teacher's belief, teaching English*

INTRODUCTION

The presence of secondary vocational schools as a secondary scorer in Indonesian experts experienced rapid development. The development has gone through several changes for the sake of improvement. This is seen from the government's efforts, starting from the procurement and improvement of facilities, graduates as well as teachers' quality, and the revision of the curriculum. Due to this change, teacher education institutions, as the institutions that train teachers, need to develop their responses to address the challenge in the implementation of English programs in schools. VHS has various fields of majors that were held in a special school and teaches one area of expertise in each specialist. The programs are in some fields such as technology and engineering; health; arts; craft and tourism; information and communication technologies; agro-business and agro-technology; and business and management.

In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language (Lie, 2009) and is officially taught as a compulsory subject throughout junior high and high school and it is also offered as a general course at the tertiary level (Kasihani, 2010). Teaching English in Vocational High School demands different knowledge of material, method, and strategies. As a reason, there are several differences between teaching English in VHS and teaching English in senior high schools. Teaching English in VHS should refer to the program study of students who are being taught. The English teachers of VHS have to teach about English component that is closely related to the students' major study,- for example, the teachers both explain and give information about English expression of handling guess to the hotel accommodation students. Besides, teachers also give information about the special terms that are used by mechanics to engineering students. The teachers of VHS have to consider the specific needs of the learners. The considerations are curriculum, classroom management, material management, activity and time management, student management, and learning resource management.

English in VHS belongs to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which described as an approach to language teaching which aims to unify the need of particular learners. ESP in vocational high school is called English for Vocational Purposes (EVP) (Widodo, 2014). Vocational is different from occupational which means that teachers and students need to learn not only specific disciplinary knowledge but also specialist discourse. Dudley-Evans and St. John stated that the teaching ESP is considered a separate activity within English Language Teaching (ELT) and part of a more general language teaching movement called "Language for Specific Purposes" (LSP), which focuses not only on the teaching of English but also on the practices (Liljedahl, 2008).

Recent studies related to teachers' beliefs have explored various aspects of beliefs such as belief about teaching, belief about learning, belief about the subject matter, etc. There are three aspects of teachers' beliefs, those are (1) learning and learner, (2) teachers' instructional roles, and (3) student activities (Reynold cited in Ispri, 2015). Then, there are five aspects of teachers' beliefs: (1) practical (2) personal practical (3) subject matter content (4) pedagogical content, and (5) curricular (Diaz, 2013). While adding a couple of belief aspects; those are beliefs about (1) English (2) learning (3) teaching (4) program and curriculum (5) language teaching as a profession (Richard & Renandya, 2001). The importance of the study on teachers' beliefs namely: (1) to identify the guiding principles that teachers reflect exclusively in the classroom practice, (2) the teachers' beliefs are going to assist the teachers to see how the teachers understand teachers' pedagogical knowledge and (3) to depict the teachers' perspectives and how the beliefs demonstrated in the practices (Breen, 2001, cited in Li, 2012). The importance of teachers' beliefs is affirmed by some initial theorists of teachers' beliefs. Teachers' beliefs significantly help teachers' understanding of personal teaching (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Then, Pajares (1992) notes that beliefs helped individuals understand themselves and the environment they were in. No double that teachers' beliefs played an important role in the whole teaching process and decision making in the classroom. Instructors must examine personal beliefs and thoughts about teaching, which can assist them to understand how to manage teaching tasks and reflect personal beliefs clearly (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Besides, instructors' knowledge and thoughts are the fundamental framework or model of classroom activities, which are derived not only from themselves but also from the learners.

The current study also applies both quantitative and qualitative approaches or mixed research approach. Several reasons for choosing this type of research namely to increase

the strength of each approach, to provide a multi-analysis of complex issues, and to improve validity (Dörnyei, 2007). In this study, the quantitative research included the use of a questionnaire while the qualitative one involved in-depth interviews and classroom observations.

Thus, this study is interesting because it explores not only the cognitive aspects of teachers but also their beliefs about the teaching and learning of English in VHS. This study is aimed to develop a more comprehensive account of teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. The investigation is some SMK in Majenang, Cilacap because this is the context in which the researcher has worked with teachers and has got to know the challenges teachers face in their teaching English in VHS. Exploring the beliefs and classroom practices of the teachers could be an initial step to be able to identify teachers' needs in this district to improve their teaching professionalism.

METHOD

The method which is used in this research is descriptive, that is, the method intentionally done to collect information about a phenomenon as in the pure condition (Arikunto, 2010). This research was done in sort of case study to find out and describe the teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in teaching ESP for Vocational high school. A case study is employed to scrutinize intensively certain participants which alleged to have certain cases (Sudjana, 2010). The respondent of the study was six vocational English teachers working in three different vocational high schools. Three of them were experienced and certified teachers and the other three were novice teachers. T1 was a novice teacher with 4 years teaching experience, T2 was a certificated and experienced teacher with 11 teaching years experience, T3 had been teaching for more than 19 years, T4 had 11 years-experience, T5 had 6 years teaching experience, and T6 had 5 years teaching experience.

To answer the research questions, four different data collection methods were employed: interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Seven guiding questions were elaborated to get a deeper understanding of what the participants thought. The interviews were conducted in the language that the participants felt comfortable using, Indonesian and/or English. Each interview took about 20-30 minutes and was audio-recorded. At the end of each interview session, the researcher asked the interviewee to grant permission to observe his/her class. Observations were carried out to observe the teaching and learning process to compare the teachers' beliefs and their practices. The researcher was a non-participant observer who took field notes during the observation. In total, there were 6 class observations; each of which lasted for 60-100 minutes.

After collecting the data, the researcher started the analysis process. Data were triangulated from multiple data sources and techniques. Data sources were participants, events, and documents. Then data were analyzed using line by line analysis consisting of the data coding, the categories/concept, theoretical sampling, sore category/concept, data saturation, memo-ing, and writing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In line with the purpose of the research, the findings are presented based on the analysis taken from interviews, observation, questionnaire, and review of documents.

Teacher's beliefs about Subject matter and curriculum

In this study, the first thing that the data show is that there was a considerable variation in how teachers see ESP.

“... ESP is, in my opinion, is English for specific major ya, for example, engineering so it is about electricity, pharmacy is about pharmacy. It focuses on more practice and mostly consists of dialogue”. (T1.T5.T6)

Then, another teacher added that he has experienced ESP which according to him, was an example of ESP meaning and purpose.

“...when I was in S-1, I did not get material about ESP, but I had been an immigrant worker (TKI), and I took the course for 6 months about tourism. So I know about English for jobs. I think ESP is English for a job. (T3)

From the findings, it is seen that teachers misunderstand about ESP for vocational high school. ESP itself is defined to meet specific needs of the learners; make use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves, and it is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skill, discourse and genre (Dudley, 1997).

The other data supported the findings that there is no ESP curriculum guidance which meets students' need. Teachers believe that even though there is no ESP curriculum to guide their teaching, they can keep teaching their students as long as there is a textbook (T4, T2). Even though the textbook for each program in that vocational high school is the same. The textbook also does not cover all the students' needs as ESP learners. Here, they consider that the textbook can be regarded as a substitute for a curriculum because the textbook contains information about the themes, the objectives of teaching, materials, and exercises (T1, T5, T6). That is, they have many of the features that teachers said were important in the curriculum as guides for teaching.

Next, teachers believe that the curriculum or the textbook provides resources to fill gaps in their beliefs (T1, T2, T3, T5). The existing textbooks are considered helpful for the teacher to make up for their lack of knowledge about what to teach and how to teach. Some textbooks may contain lesson plans, semester, and annual programs which help teachers to manage their teaching program and to use the allotted time effectively. The teachers' decision-making in terms of using the textbook instead of the curriculum is supported by the principals' attitudes toward this issue (T2, T4, T6). They do not seem to believe that, in the absence of a curriculum, they have a responsibility to plan their curriculum to address the needs of students, even though they believe that this is what a subject requires. In part, this is because they believe they do not have the necessary knowledge to develop their curriculum and so the textbook becomes important for scoping and organizing their work.

The study successfully examined how teachers understand the curriculum, especially the English curriculum for vocational high school and what this reveals about teachers' beliefs about the curriculum itself and how they relate to knowledge. It shows that their beliefs about curriculum influence their practice in particular ways in the absence of an official curriculum. Their beliefs are intertwined and interconnected in terms of shaping the teachers' framework for teaching English and they influence teachers' decision-making in their classroom practice and their strategies in addressing the issues they confront in their teaching.

Belief about their Teaching and Learning

Different views have been proposed by the teachers to explain their understanding of a teacher's role such as the transmission of knowledge, a motivator, a facilitator, and a model of language use for their students. Their different understandings might be influenced by their different levels of pedagogical knowledge. The teachers' pedagogical knowledge reflects their understanding of pedagogical principles and techniques for teaching in general, not limited by the particular subject matter.

"...Teaching is giving knowledge, mainly about English which they need to have good communication, it's not only about theory but also practice as SMK needs more practice". (T1, T2, T3, T5).

It is seen that teachers' beliefs influence their views and actions in their teaching practices. The first teacher articulates their beliefs about the teacher's role in different ways from the second teacher. The first teacher believed that his roles in the classroom and English language teaching are delivering material and modeling for the students how to use the correct language. The idea of delivering the materials is intertwined with the teachers' beliefs about his role to transfer knowledge to their students. These two roles have implications for the management of teaching because the teachers position themselves as the sole source of information and tend to adopt a teacher-centered approach.

Their belief then compared to their teaching practices. The result of observation showed that the teaching practice is dominated by the teacher's explanation about the material. In fact, T1 and T2 believed that teaching English for SMK consists of more practice than theories. However, in the teaching process, teachers explained the material all the time and only inserted questions and answer techniques without any students' activity.

Beliefs about teacher's roles

There are two main points which can be revealed concerning teachers' beliefs about their roles as an English language teacher.

"... teachers' main job is delivering material to students". (T1.T5.T6)

"...Yes, the main teachers' job is teaching, it is better for the teacher to be a model for students, in pronunciation, and speaking. Teachers should be confident to make the students competent, make them understand, and motivate them to succeed". (T2.T3.T4)

Firstly, teachers see their roles in the classroom in different ways. Three respondent emphasizes their roles as being to transfer knowledge to their students. He believed that their main role in the classroom is to pass on knowledge and information related to the material to the students. The teacher focuses on how to enrich the students' knowledge of English however, they placed less emphasis on how to facilitate them in using the language in context. The decision to play a role relating to knowledge transfer is also influenced by his belief that he is the only source of knowledge about English. On the other hand, the other teachers understand their role as being facilitators (Nunan, 1989) and motivators for their students in learning English. To facilitate can be understood as a

process to provide conditions that allow students to engage in learning and build for themselves his understandings and skills. The teachers believed that for his students to be able to learn English, they need to provide more opportunities for the students to practice using the language. The teachers also believed that they play the role as a class motivator for their students in learning English. They believed that the students need to be continuously motivated and encouraged so that they can see learning as a challenging process, not a threatening one.

Secondly, beliefs about the teacher's role influence the way both teachers approach their teaching. As found in the observation, the teacher who believes that teaching is a matter of knowledge transfer, tend to practice a teacher-centered approach in which the teacher controls what is taught (Toh, Ho, Chew, & Riley, 2003). The decision to practice a teacher-centered approach is influenced by this teacher's belief about teaching English. The limitation of their content knowledge about English for specific purposes and their pedagogical content knowledge about how to teach English hamper the teachers to develop their approach in teaching.

Beliefs about their learners

There is a fundamental reflective question for teachers to ask themselves about their learners "who are my learners?". This question looks simple but it requires teachers to present a comprehensive understanding of learners not only as a group but also as individuals as it is a prerequisite for teachers to believe about their learners that they are individuals who are ready to succeed (Marsh, 2008).

"...I ever taught SMP or Mts but their level is different. My class is dominated by female students, so far they like to work in a group". (T3, T4).

"... I know my students, they like jokes, and they are active when I asked them to work in a group rather than individual work. (T1.T2.T5.T6)

In this study, the teachers believed that working in a group can be a way of adapting his teaching to his learners' preferences. Through working in a group, the students will have more opportunities to interact and to learn with other students. They believe that vocational high school likes to work in groups rather than work individually and they have a way of responding to this, even if he cannot meet other learning preferences. They view learning a language as a social and interactional act or process as has been argued by Akey (2006). Overall, the teachers acknowledge that learning is an interactive and socially dependent process where he tries to combine cognitive learning with psychomotor learning and affective learning through activities such as games and songs (Khader, 2007).

However, the observation result showed that most students are not too interested in learning English and that this is reflected in their engagement in learning, their desire to have English classes, and their preference for learning through an explanation. Teachers believe that they need to create active learning for their students. The idea of creating active learning is presented by Auster and Wylie (2006) who argue that active learning can happen when the teachers apply some activities such as informal small group, role-playing, or other activities and those activities reflect learners' characteristics.

Then, observation data revealed that the teachers do not use many strategies to motivate the students. They used jokes or funny expressions to motivate the students but

it is not connected to English learning. In other conditions, the teacher tends to use group work in which the members between females and males are not balancing. It seemed that the men are neglected as they have limited numbers. Thus, there is a mismatch between teachers' beliefs in students' interest and ability with their teaching practice. Moreover, the teaching and learning process is dominated by teachers' explanations and limits of students' activity or practice.

Teacher's beliefs about assessment

Dealing with beliefs about assessment, the teachers shared the same view of assessment; to assess means to test (stated by T1-T6). The teachers' comments reflect their understanding that assessment is the process of giving a mark or score on students' tests. The teacher believes that tests and assignments contribute differently to students' learning; however, both tests and assignments can be used to inform the teacher about how much the students have learned and understood the material. The intention of knowing how much the students have learned from the lesson or the content reflects teacher' general pedagogical knowledge and belief about assessment as a way to do an evaluation, following (Stipek, et al., 2001) who claim that many teachers assess to evaluate their students' learning and get the data about their learning achievement. The teachers in this study believed that a test as an examination which is administered by the teacher or the school at a specific time in order to find out about the students' progress in learning. Commonly, a test is administered at a particular learning stage, i.e. mid-semester or the end of the semester. The test covers material that has been taught by the students, the test is marked, and the marks are used as the data for the teachers to judge whether their students have met the required standard for the course.

Concerning designing assessment, teachers believe there are external and internal sources. Internal source of assessment is the teachers themselves and assessment designed by teachers is mostly for daily use. However, some teachers who design their assessment. They feel confident to write his tests or exercises since he feels that his content and pedagogical content knowledge support him to do that (T2, T3, T4). On the other hand, the rest teachers (T1, T5, T6) do not feel confident to write their exercises or tests since their content knowledge is limited to support them to do that. However, for formal assessment, most of the teachers believe they should use tests designed by external sources, especially by a government authority, since they believe that assessment designed by an education authority is more reliable, legitimate and relevant than assessment designed by individual teachers. Besides, teachers believe that standardization of a test written by an education authority more suitable for higher stakes assessment and attributing final marks.

To conclude, there are two main points proposed by the teachers related to what they believe they are supposed to do with the students' assessment results. First, the teachers believe that the first thing they need to do with the students' assessment results is to document them in their marks book. This procedure is an initial activity before going further to the process of judging the students' learning. To be able to judge, the teachers need to interpret the students' scores in terms of achievement. Secondly, teachers use the data for purposes such as to rank the students or to decide whether the students are eligible to go to a higher level of study. The data is used for reporting purposes. This way of using the data for reporting reflects teachers' general pedagogical knowledge about working with the assessment process and procedures. The teachers report the students' achievement to parents and schools and other parties if necessary, such as local education

authority at the district level. This procedure happens since the teachers believe that assessment results are used to inform both the education authority and the parents about the students' achievement. The parents need to know their learners receive regular feedback and are making progress in their learning.

Teacher's belief about school context

All teachers believed that their school is a private school which has its own rules and regulation. It revealed that the teachers tried more to obey the school regulation rather than the government's regulation in teaching and learning processes such as in implementing types of assessment. They did not assess the students' performance ability as the school did not demand and regulate it. Moreover, their school lacked facilities to support teaching English. The finding in this study about school context is in line with the theory of teachers' beliefs about school context refer to teachers' beliefs about their school environment or circumstances, including its administrative staff, students, other teachers, school buildings and equipment (Lumpe, Haney, & Czerniak, 2000). Beliefs about school context variables can also exert a tremendous influence on how teachers translate their thoughts into action (Lederman, et.al, 1999) explains that. This is because they impact values, beliefs, policies, and resource allocation. This view implies that teaching cannot be separated from the school context because the process of establishing value is embedded in the context and this value system affects teachers' practice. Every element in the environment also contributes to different needs, constraints, and opportunities which can shape teachers' beliefs about what they can do in responding to those needs, constraints, and opportunities.

Teacher's belief about self

The teachers in this study believed that they do not have the basic knowledge to teach ESP for SMK or English which specific to the students' majors. They admitted that their undergraduate education prepares them to teach English for general which is different from English for specific.

"... I tried my best to do my duty but I don't know whether it is accepted or not because the students are viewers. I feel confident to teach them, and I feel confident with my English". (T2, T3, T4)

"... I am new in teaching Vocational high school, I need more practice and experience, I am good at teaching but I don't master ESP well". (T1, T5, T6).

The findings of beliefs of self involve teachers' beliefs about their competence in doing their work, (e.g. planning to teach, managing classroom interaction, undertaking assessment, using and modifying teaching material). Teachers' beliefs about their competence are also related to their self-efficacy beliefs – that is whether a teacher is confident about being able to conduct effective teaching (Erdem & Demirel, 2007). Although they did not develop a model of beliefs, Erdem and Demirel have identified beliefs about the self as being of particular importance in teaching. They explain that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are very important in terms of decisions regarding classroom management, organizing courses, teaching, motivating the students for learning, and communicating with the students effectively. Teacher self-belief is important since a positive self-belief can lead teachers to provide higher quality teaching.

There is evidence that teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy have greater motivation which encourages them to work harder and to cope with the difficulties they encounter in the classroom, for example, when students are difficult to teach.

Factors of Teacher's Beliefs

The findings of this study revealed that the teachers' beliefs are influenced by some factors which are explained in detail:

- a. **Teachers' teaching experience.** Teachers' teaching experiences can be the primary source of beliefs. This happens because the teacher is directly involved in his/her teaching practice and can evaluate the effectiveness of his/her practice. It is found from the respondent teaching experiences; T2, T3, T4 have more than ten years of teaching experience so they feel confident in their field. T1, T5, and T6 indicated they need more practice and training to teach ESP.
- b. **Teachers' experiences in teacher education.** Teachers form their beliefs through their teacher education. This implies that education background is an opportunity for a teacher to generate particular knowledge and shape their beliefs. Teacher education has become a current focus of discussion related to its pivotal roles in contributing and shaping pre-service teachers' basic knowledge of teaching. T1-T6 are S-1 and 3 of them are certified which means they must be competent in teaching ESP, even they stated that they need more guidance especially handbooks for students which specific for ESP.
- c. **Teachers' educational pathway.** The pathway by which teachers are educated is another factor that contributes to teachers' beliefs. The educational pathway does not just refer to the degree that they have completed but also relates to the content teachers have learned. T2, T3, T4 who are certified are educated more supported by the certificate.
- d. **Teachers' life experiences and social backgrounds.** Social interaction, including interactions with colleagues and the teacher's active involvement in a professional organization or community, can contribute to shaping teachers' beliefs about teaching. Intensive communication and discussion about teaching is a potential input for teachers to modify their beliefs or generate new ideas about teaching.
- e. **Teachers' school context.** The school context contributes to teacher's forming beliefs. The schools' geographical location, community, and facilities create possibilities for teachers to gain and to develop beliefs. Different schools' contexts contribute to developing different forms of teachers' knowledge and to different beliefs about their work. It is seen from T1-T6 who come from different schools that demand different goals and implemented the different programs.

The relation between beliefs and classroom practices

The relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices to be highly complex. In this study, it is found that the teachers who believe that English for SMK consists of more practice than theory do not implement their beliefs in their practice. It can be seen from the result of the researcher's observation that the teachers dominated and directed the teaching and learning process. Moreover, there are limits of students' practice or activity which supports the students to be able to communicate well as the

specific learners. This finding became new evidence that there are a gap and distinction between teachers' beliefs and their practices. It is in line with much evidence from other researchers which suggests that language teachers do not always teach in line with their stated beliefs (Richards, et al) other researchers, teachers' beliefs may differ depending on how they are elicited. Teachers may be drawing on their 'technical knowledge' when asked to talk about their beliefs, but on their 'practical knowledge' in their actual practice. *Secondly*, beliefs seem to interact within a complex network, such that one belief may not change despite the presence of overwhelming evidence, perhaps because the particular belief is part of deeper core belief which is much harder to change (Burns 2003; Richard et al. 2001;). *Thirdly*, beliefs may change without affecting classroom practice. Numerous studies have shown that contextual factors, such as a rigid curriculum, large classes, preparing students for exams, a heavy workload or low level of students discipline, may discourage experimentation and encourage a safe strategy of sticking to conventional teaching methods and materials (Ayers, et.al, 2006). *Fourthly*, routines may be hard to change. As it is in this study that teachers' activity, based on four times of observation in the teaching and learning process, is monotone and dominated by explanation. Research suggests that experienced teachers make new decisions in the classroom, instead of relying on established routines which are resistant to change, even in the face of evidence that they are not working.

CONCLUSION

The teachers have different beliefs about ESP as they view it is not for SMK. However, SMK itself has some majors which need different English related to their program. The teachers admitted that they have no basic knowledge and experiences to teach English for SMK which is specified on the students' program and major. They just believed that teaching English for SMK consists of more practice than theories. In practice, teachers implemented the steps of teaching with steeping the sequence (engagement, exploration, elaboration, and confirmation). They carried out the learning activities, which do not represent the process of the way the students get the knowledge to attain the communicative ability. Consequently, the teachers dominated the teaching and learning process by explanation, without focusing on students understanding by giving activities. In the process, teachers do not use English and it is dominated by L1 as they thought that it will help the students understand the material and their explanation. They realized that the students are not motivated to learn English as they know that English is learnt as foreign language so the teachers tried to be good motivator and facilitator in classroom activities. However, the efforts are not yet supported by the school facilities, teaching sources to teach English for specific purposes. There are some factors, which impact on the teachers' beliefs and practices. They consist of teachers' teaching experience; teachers' experience as school students; teachers' experience in teacher education; teachers' educational pathway; teachers' life experiences and social background; and teachers' school context.

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