Bridging the gap between theories and practice: Alumni’s perceptions on English teaching subjects in English department

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Abstract: The body of theories in the area of English Language Teaching (ELT) has grown exponentially in the past decades. The theories of ELT have been developed continuously over time in order to keep up with the market needs and teaching trends. However, it is believed that ELT theories are not always in line with the real practice of English teaching. This research aims to investigate whether the topics, materials, and syllabi of the ELT subjects, which the alumni learnt, are in accordance with the need of the education industry. In order to acquire the data for this research, interviews are conducted towards the alumni. The participants are 15 alumni who are currently teaching English in various English language courses and educational institutions. The results show that the alumni argue that ELT theories presented in five syllabi are important and useful. In addition, there are two different perceptions of the alumni regarding the ELT theories. One is from the alumni who teach at school and the other from the ones teaching in English courses. Those two different perceptions will be included as the data in the revision of ELT syllabi.

Keywords: perceptions, ELT theories, teaching practice

Background

English departments in universities in Indonesia give the students chance to study the English language teaching (ELT) theories and their practices. Studying those ELT theories and practices, such as in a university where the researcher works, renown strengths in studying the teaching methods and approaches, material developments, language assessment, designing an English course, and the teaching practices in the classroom which are delivered in several subjects. It is expected that completing those courses make the students a much sought so that the knowledge can be useful once they become teachers after graduate.

Due to the fact that those ELT theories learnt in the courses might be different from their practices in the real class, the syllabus of those subjects must always be reviewed regularly by conducting after course needs analysis which are conducted after the course to see which teaching learning processes have worked well and which ones should be reviewed (Dudley-Evans & St. Johns, 1998). The revision based on the needs analysis usually covers the topics, material, and which should be delivered, the teaching learning processes, and the textbooks used (Nunan, 1988).

One of the target populations in which the data of the needs analysis gained is from the perception of the alumni as the ex-students (Harmer, 2007). This research is expected to bring benefits to the institution where the researcher works. In addition, the results of this research will be beneficial to curriculum designers, ELT lecturers, and English Department students themselves.

Methodology

The participants of this research are fifteen alumni who took teaching subjects in the English department in a university in Indonesia. They graduated in 2017 and 2018. All of them, who are Indonesian, have already been English teachers. Seven of them teach in schools and the other seven alumni teach in several English courses in Indonesia. Those fifteen alumni are chosen carefully; they must take all of the teaching courses and graduated with good results.

The data is gained by conducting semi-structured interviews with those participants. The interviews are basically trying to find whether the English
language teaching theories delivered in five teaching subjects can meet the alumni’s needs when they are teaching English in both formal schools and English courses in Indonesia.

**Results**

The findings of this research are presented in two parts. One is analyzing the perception of the alumni which will talk whether each teaching subject is important or not at their work and the other is regarding the alumni’s perception regarding the syllabi of each subject and its application in the real teaching learning processes. The first part which talks about the implication whether each subject should be present in the curriculum or not is presented is two ways as well. One is based on the perception of the alumni who teach at schools and the other is based on those who are teaching in English courses.

Regarding part one, the results of the interviews show that the alumni think that the present teaching subjects should be available in the English department curriculum due to the fact that the knowledge gained from the teaching subjects, namely the Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching, Course Design, Material development, Language Assessment, and Teaching Practice are used as the basic knowledge when they are teaching. However, regarding the degree of importance, the results are slightly different. 100% of the participants think that the first subject, namely “Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching” are very important. As for the second subject – Course Design – 25% of the alumni who works at schools thinks that it is slightly important while 75% think that the subject is important. However, the alumni who teach in English courses argue that Course Design is very important since they have to design their own English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Courses. Regarding the Material Development subject, 25% of the alumni who teach at school argue that this subject is not really important since all of the materials have already been available at schools. In addition, there are also teacher books available to support the teacher while teaching. It is found out that those 25% alumni work in reputable international school. The other 75% alumni still think that the material development subject is important to support their teaching learning process at schools. The result is slightly different from those who are teaching in the English course. All of them think that Material development subject is very important due to the fact they have to adjust the materials available in the subject to meet the students’ present situation. The fourth subject, namely the Language Assessment, reveal a different result from the third. 100% alumni working at school state clearly that this subject is very important since they have to compose summative and formative tests at schools. 28% alumni who teach in a course say that language assessment is a very important course. 57% alumni who teach in English course think that Language Assessment is important. The other 15% think that the subject is not really important. They argue that the English courses do not require them to compose tests. It turns out that the ones who argue that Language Assessment subject is very important are positioned in managerial position in the English course. The last course, Teaching Practice, which require the students to practice all of the teaching skills in class seems to be the most favorite course. All of the alumni with no doubt state that this subject must always be present in the curriculum. This subject has helped the alumni to try teaching in a real class.

After discussing the importance of each subject to be presented in the curriculum, each of the alumni is being asked about which part of each subject is used at work and which part is actually not needed. The results of the interviews in this part is being analyzed so that the syllabus can be reviewed in order to be more useful and applicable. The next discussion should talk about the topic in the teaching courses syllabus. It discussed which topics are useful in the real teaching and which ones should be omitted due to the fact that they are not being used anymore. In relation to this, the textbooks will also be reviewed.

The first subject, Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching (AMLT), includes the approaches, methods, and techniques in teaching English to all levels. In addition, the teaching the English skills are also discussed in this subject. In relation to this subject, all of the alumni have agreed that not all of the approaches, method, and teaching techniques learnt can be used in class. For example, multiple intelligence approaches
cannot really be applied since their big class cannot really accommodate it. The most commonly used in both schools and English course is presentation-practice-production technique. The alumni argue that their students still demand their teacher explain the lesson first before they perform the English activities. In some schools where the alumni teach, especially in international schools, task-based language teaching and even a project-based learning have sometimes been used to teach English. In short, all of the alumni agreed that no particular method can be fully applied in teaching English in a session in both schools and English courses. This might happen since a lot of adjustment must be applied in teaching the real classes. For those reasons, the alumni suggest that more teaching techniques should be included in the syllabus, such as using songs, pictures, videos, and flash cards. More English language games should also be included in the syllabus since they are proven to be useful in teaching English to young learners.

Since the lesson stages are also discussed in Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching subject, the alumni suggest that the engage-study-activate lesson stages should be discussed more deeply in the syllabus. There are two main reasons: (1) while teaching English in the real class in both schools and English courses, the lesson stages which are used is engage-study-activate (ESA), and (2) the English proficiency of the students whom the alumni taught is still basic to intermediate. It means that most of the students are not ready to be taught by using the engage-activate-study (EAS) lesson stages. By considering this alumni’s feedback, the Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching Syllabus will focus more on ESA lesson stages.

The other valuable feedback from the alumni regarding this subject is that teaching reading skills must be highlighted in the syllabus. The reason is that teaching English at school is mostly teaching reading since the national examination is mostly assessing the reading skills. The other skills which are writing, speaking and listening should be introduced in general in the syllabus. The most important is that the syllabus must show that teaching writing is not only asking the students to write in English without guidelines, teaching speaking is not merely asking the students to speak, and teaching listening is not only about listening without relating it with other skills. As for the alumni who are teaching in English courses, they found out that the most important is teaching the English grammar and vocabularies. They also say that the AMLT syllabus must include the topic of integrating the English knowledge and skills so that the students can use English appropriately in context. To conclude, the AMLT needs to include more applicable techniques in teaching English and the theories must be renewed. As a result, the newest edition of the textbooks which includes more new theories and omit the old ones must be used. The alumni specifically suggest the Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching textbooks composed by Richards & Rodgers (2014).

The second subject which is analyzed in accordance whether the syllabus meets the reality or not is Course Design (CD). The alumni who work in the English courses argue that all of the topics in the CD syllabus are up-to-date and can be appropriately used when they work. The most important topic in CD syllabus is needs analysis followed by the syllabus design. The alumni say that they are able to teach in an in-house training since they have the background knowledge learnt in CD classes. Even though the alumni who work in schools think that the CD subject is important, they think that the most important topic is making the lesson plan since they have to make it every time they have to teach. In addition, all of the alumni have agreed that the textbooks used must be renewed, if possible, using the ones published after 2015. In short, the theories which are really useful are syllabus and lesson plan design. Needs analysis are also important for those who are teaching in English courses. Therefore, all of the theories are hopefully useful for teaching English in the real class.

The third subject which is discussed is regarding the Material Development (MD) course. In this subject, the students learn how to select and evaluate the teaching materials. The alumni who teach at schools argue that the most important theory to be present in the MD syllabus is evaluating the materials since the textbooks have already been available at schools. The teacher has just to adjust those materials in accordance to the students’ needs. The alumni who teach in the English courses, however, argue that selecting the materials is also important due to the fact that they sometimes have to choose their own materials. In general, the body of MD theories is considered to
be up to date and useful by the alumni. They just think that the textbooks used must be more practical and the theories should be less included in MD syllabus. In the next MD revision, modules should be considered used. In addition, the taxonomy bloom must be elevated to the application and analysis.

The fourth subject which is analyzed is Language Assessment (LA). In this course, the syllabus presents the type of test, validity, reliability and practicality of assessment. The alumni teaching in formal education argues that all of the topics presented in LA syllabus are important. They have to compose different tests for different level. All of the theories can be applied in the real teaching. They just add one more feedback which states that more practices in composing test item, especially multiple choice and essays, are needed in this course. The alumni who teach in English courses, on the other hands, think that this subject is just important. The reasons are that the tests have already been available in the course; they just need to use them when needed. However, the alumni who are in managerial positions think that all of the topics are in line with what they do at work. In short, all of the topics in LA syllabus will present in the next LA syllabus due to the fact that they are useful at work.

The last subject is about Teaching Practice (TP). This course basically practices all of the theories discussed in the previous four teaching courses. All of the alumni, both who are working in schools and English courses, agree that all of the topics are very important. They agree that trying to teach in the class has helped them to raise their self-confidence. They also have the opportunity to get the feedback about their performances and at the same time can see and analyze their friends’ performances when they do a micro teaching in class. All of the alumni have also agreed that on the job training might be useful for the students since they will face the real class with the real problems. In short, all of the topics are going to be available in TP syllabus.

Conclusions

As can be seen from the results, the alumni think that all of the teaching courses are important. However, the English language teaching (ELT) syllabi must be reviewed. The revision mostly covers the textbooks which should be renewed. Using modules which are more practical is also recommended. In addition, it must be noted that the perception of the alumni who teach at formal education is different from those who are teaching in English courses. Therefore, it is wise to include those two different situations in the ELT syllabi.

References