

# When Theories Do Not Work Well: Voices from Former Young Teachers in Remote Areas

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## abstract

*This research aims at describing problems faced by the SM-3T teachers in remote areas and opinions about how knowledge and skills gained in previous education contribute to their teaching performance.*

*This study was a small scale descriptive qualitative study that involves 21 former SM-3T teachers posted in 2012, 2015 and 2016. The data were collected using open-ended questionnaire via Google Form and online interviews. The data were analysed by doing data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing or verification.*

*The results of this research showed that 95,2% of the participants stated that they cannot apply all of knowledge and skill studied in the previous education effectively during the teaching and learning process because of many limitations in the 3T areas. Those problems are related to the students, learning materials, language, learning environment, and facilities.*

*Keywords: SM-3T, remote areas, limitations*

## A. Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that there is a disparity of education equity between Indonesian areas. Actually there is an oversupply of teachers in Indonesia (world Bank, 2013), however it they are not well distributed (RTI International, 2015). The education quality in a number of regions in Indonesia is relatively good unless in some areas categorized as of frontier, outermost and lagging areas or *3T (Terdepan, Terluar, dan Tertinggal)*. To deal with the problem, *Sarjana Mendidik di Daerah Terdepan, Terluar, dan Tertinggal (SM-3T)* program has been launched. About three thousand graduates of LPTK (Teacher Training universities/ Lembaga Pendidik Tenaga Kependidikan) are distributed to the 3T areas for a year. English is a compulsory subjects in junior and senior high schools so that fresh graduates of English Education Department (EED) are encouraged to join the SM3T program. Despite the pros and cons, SM3T gives far-reaching benefits for all parties involved. After a year, participating teachers will enjoy a one-year free professional training program, PPG (*Program Profesi Guru/ Teachers Profession Program*). That is why so far this program attracts a huge number of applicants.

This article describes problems faced by the novice teachers and opinions about how knowledge and skills gained in previous education contribute to their teaching performance. Although they have learnt many theories of subject matters and teaching methods in universities, their field experience is still limited. They did the English teaching practice at schools for about one to two months; some, but not all, has taught English in private courses. They use this experience as a stepping stone to teach better. However, this time they are posted in a new different place. Stern (1983, p. 24) mentioned that some theories are not yet 'productive' for they are ineffective and not economical. Moreover they waste the energy and do not give "commensurate results." When experienced teachers tend to be sceptical about new theories (Stern 1983, p 24), less experienced teachers, especially fresh graduates, might depend a lot on them.

## B. Theoretical Framework

Dreyfus and Dreyfus in Tsui (2003, p.10) proposed 5 different stages of skill acquisition : novice, advanced beginners, competent, proficient, and expert. In general novice teachers refer to “teachers with little or no teaching experience” and usually they have “subject matter knowledge but no teaching experience at all and no formal pedagogical training.” The SM3T teachers are in the first year of their teaching; hence they can be categorized as novice teacher that according to Tsui (ibid) their performance is mainly based on rules and “objective facts and features related to skills.” In universities student-teachers study various theories that shape their knowledge and skills. Usually the fresh graduates rely a lot on theories as they still have less experience. Some experienced language teachers disagree with the theories as these often do not work in practice. In this case theories are like “*an unattainable ideal of a set of postulates which are both applicable on the harsh world of reality.*” (Stern, 1983,p 23). In many studies teaching experience is used as one among many factors to distinguish levels of expertise.To be more professional, someone needs to get sufficient field experience and update his/her knowledge, skills and comprehension (Sari, 2002 in Adhyani, 2015).

### **C. Research Method**

This is a small scale descriptive qualitative study that involves 21 former SM-3T teachers posted in 2012, 2015 and 2016. Data was collected from September to October 2016 by using open-ended questionnaire via Google Form and online interviews. The data were analysed by adapting Miles and Huberman’s (1994) steps comprising: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing or verification.

### **D. Research Findings and Discussion**

Responding to the question about the contribution of the knowledge and skills studied in previous education, 95.2% of the participants stated that they cannot apply all of them effectively. The problems faced are related to students, learning materials, language, learning environment, and facilities.

#### **1. Problems related to students**

About 95.2% of respondents met problems related to the students. Students’ motivation and comprehension skills are two prominent challenges they face. A teacher stated that many of her students went to school only to get a graduation certificate, one important requirement to work in many factories in Malaysia. Those who are slightly motivated felt unsure about the direction to go after the graduate. Here is the excerpt of the interview:

*“When I asked my students about their ambitions and dreams, most of them said that they wanted to go to Malaysia. There are many factories that require workers from Indonesia. ... My students lacked of motivation in learning. They did not care about knowledge or even scores they would get because they thought that it was not important as long as they can get their diplomas. However, there were still some students with high learning motivation. They loved to learn but they confused about the chances to continue their education.”*

Students’ orientation about what to do and what can happen next influences their behaviour and attitude to learning. Only with motivation one will strive to do something they want and succeed it (Harmer, 2001, p.98). Brown (1994: 76) stated that extrinsically motivated behaviours are carried out in anticipation of rewards from outside and beyond the self. The students did not put serious concern on what they can learn in the class or what mark they will have as the result of their efforts because they do not think that what they are learning at school is relevant to their future life planning or jobs. They think that they will just end up becoming low-class workers and so they do not need to work hard during the lesson. Problems with student’s motivation actually happen anywhere; novice

teachers need experience and maturity to help their student to see and reach things that are big enough to motivate them to study. Above all, they also need to keep themselves motivated to teach.

Next is students' intellectual ability. One can be a successful language learner when she/he has a wide range of intellectual abilities (Harmer, 2001, p. 86). In general, some students are better than the others in learning. Apparently, in some 3T areas several students have problems with study skills and tend to learn slowly that the teachers need to patiently serve them. Teachers sometimes had to repeat the materials for several meetings. Some of them did not get sufficient early literacy training and proper elementary education during their childhood as there was only one teacher, who was also the headmaster, serving in the area.

Finally, students often have problems with attendance and behaviours. Most of the time, they skip classes because they help their parents work in the garden, fish in the sea, or attend various types of festivals and celebrations in their villages. The other reason is the students feel lazy to go to school. Coming on and off regularly causes the students miss many things and cannot follow the materials well. As the result, their performance is not good and they do not get the success feeling in their learning. This will be like the domino effect as one bad thing causes other bad thing to happen. The teachers are unhappy with the situation but cannot do much. Somehow, they also feel that they have failed and this makes them feel down.

## **2. Problems related to learning materials**

Learning materials are one of many factors influencing the success of English instruction. Sixty-six percent of the respondents agreed that learning materials are one of the problems in terms of availability and quality. Actually the teachers have provided themselves with learning materials. However, they could not use it straight away. About 70,6% of the respondents reported that the learning materials they prepared cannot be applied as they do not suit the needs. Some of IT-based materials are also useless. As admitted by 52.9 % respondents, there are textbooks in the schools but they are not suitable for the learners. Making materials in 3T areas is not easy because it is hard to get electricity, internet connection, computers and other learning devices. Since not all of host schools provide a mentor teacher for them, to solve the problems they share and discuss with other novice teachers by phone, but this is uneasy as the phone signal and internet network are slow and poor.

As parts of digital generation, the teachers embrace technology enthusiastically and are almost dependant on it. The use of modern technology in the English teaching and learning process is generally favourable, unfortunately; due to many limitations, it cannot be used and to some extent this causes desperation among young teachers.

## **3. Problems related to language**

About 47.6% of respondents agreed that language is one of the problems. Students and teachers must deal with 3 languages: English, *Bahasa Indonesia*, and a local language. In most cases SM3T teachers are placed in a culture other than theirs and must adapt quickly..Some teachers work with the students that are even less familiar with *Bahasa Indonesia* and English. Teacher of Gayo Luwes reported, "*English is completely a foreign language for most people in Terangun District. They rarely use Indonesian, even less English. My students often mixed the use of Indonesian and local language. Thus, teaching English is a tough challenge for me.*" The students learn English almost from zero and are rarely exposed to English resources. English is an alien for most of them and they cannot really see the reason why they must learn it. That the teachers cannot speak students' local languages is sometimes also a problem. In many moments the teachers are stuck as they cannot find a good way to explain using the language that the student could comprehend. This situation has been predicted, but whether the teachers have been equipped with the skills to deal with this matter is unknown.

## **4. Problems related to learning environment and facilities**

Learning environment refers to the surroundings where the students spend time studying and doing other routines that could be both inside and outside of classrooms. Manninen et al. (2007) in Kuuskorpi and González (2011) define a physical learning environment narrowly as “a conventional classroom” and “formal and informal education systems where learning takes place both inside and outside of schools.” More than a half of the respondent answered that learning environment also gave effects to the teaching and learning process (54.2%). As explained by AH ,learning environment became one big obstacle.

*“The less conducive learning environment became one of the obstacles I faced ... The condition of school buildings where one room was partitioned using zinc into six classes made the learning conditions were less favourable, especially in case of multigrade class.”*

In general learning facilities in 3T areas is not very conducive. Ministry of Education (MOE) of New Zealand emphasizes the important role of “school property” in education, together with other factors such as family and resources, and states that inadequate facilities influence on student achievement and engagement negatively. Education will be successful if the parents support their children; however, many parents are less concerned about this. They are busy and rarely pay attention to what their children do in schools.

Reflecting to the findings, there are many things to ponder by the stakeholders and relevant parties. First, novice teachers in Indonesia and elsewhere need sufficient chances and supports to apply their newly acquired knowledge. They also need to get ample opportunities to discuss with others, especially a more experienced teacher, about what has been done, what to do or how to solve a problem. There should be someone that closely monitor their performance and tell their progress.

Teachers’ readiness is one key factor in the success of SM3T program. Not all of them are really ready to face the challenge. Some teachers were confused and hopeless in the first 3 months because some of their knowledge and skills could not function well. In this case, the policy should also be criticised. All this time, those who are sent are the less-experienced novice teachers. In fact 3T areas needs more skilled and knowledgeable teachers, so instead of sending the novice ones why not sending expert teachers or at least the graduates of PPG that have developed stronger intuition to deal with certain problems as the result of hours of practice.

World Bank reported that the quality of students applying for teacher training has improved (Chang et al, 2014). This is good as the input quality of teacher can possibly increase. Therefore universities must plan, implement and evaluate their teacher training program in a better way. Universities are expected to be more careful and watchful in anticipating future teaching context for their student teachers so they can survive in various context of teaching in Indonesia. There is a call for the betterment of SM3T program and this can be started by listening to the voices of teachers who have spent hundreds of days there.

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