

STUDYING ENGLISH LITERATURE IN INDONESIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

This article examines the challenges and opportunities for students of English Literature in Indonesia amidst forces of globalization and technological advancements in most aspects of life. Demographic transition of users and providers of the English language has brought about such challenges as observable lack of maturity in English scholarship and automation's impact on education today. It can be argued that such challenges can be seen as opportunities by a creative rather than product-oriented curriculum. Given that studying literature is not only to train cognitive skills of interpreting texts, English Literature teaching in Indonesia should also impart values so as to inspire learners into becoming autonomous, self-fulfilled and emancipated global citizen. Opportunities are open if studying English Literature can include humanistic-contextual topics, discerning use of technology and transformative research method.

Keywords: English Literature, challenges, opportunities

INTRODUCTION

Carolyn Porter once raised a question about the relevance of reading from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf novels with what the work force wants from English Literature graduates in the United States (1994). Given the demographic change of American society along with its linguistics and political-economy impacts, English is not a mother tongue for most students who enter the English Literature Department. Porter suggested a thoughtful assessment of the American Studies curriculum to become a more reflective discipline that fits the context of present-day American society since tens of languages are used by students off-campus in their everyday life. English Literature class in America is reportedly full of students who speak about 20 different languages at home like Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Indian, Indonesian, etc. Similarly, a decade later, David Crystal argues that the multilingual context with which English is spoken today requires conceptual shifts from how English is previously studied (2004).

There are two other names that make redefinition of studying English (Literature) an urgency, namely David Graddol, a British applied linguist and researcher working for the British Council, and the American

theorist and literature critic J. Hillis Miller (see Dewi, 2009). In 1997, the British Council appointed Graddol to explore the future, trends and relationships of English with other languages worldwide given the global spread of the language as a *lingua franca*. The result is his published book in 2006 *English Next*, that summaries demographic shift, political-economic trends and the changing (inter)national status of the English language in each user country as well as the language policies and implications thereof. Meanwhile, Miller in *Black Holes* (1999) describes the 'fate' of the study of literature and humanities in the post-Cold War context, the globalization of economics and technology as well as the transfer of funds from the federal government to transnational corporations. Miller questions whether humanities studies are still capable of regulating themselves since multinational big companies are now in charge of the university's major funding sources. For example, at the University of California at Irvine, almost all core research receive donors from various transnational companies owned by Japan, France, Germany, Korea, Taiwan and other advanced industrial countries. The university has no choice but to turn to giant capital

companies, because since the Cold War, California universities for example have to produce and create a healthy California economy. At this particular juncture, capital owners are more interested in research on computer, high-tech, medicine, genetic engineering, etc. than arts and humanities studies. Literature and social sciences studies thus have “no market”. As a result, literature research has turned stagnant. The machine for the production of knowledge in the humanities is sadly forced to stall due to the shortage of lubricating funds.

What Porter, Crystal, Graddol and Miller mulled over almost a quarter century ago is still relevant today. The same query can be raised about the future of studying English Literature in Indonesia. Is the future of English graduates as bleak? Surprisingly, the shifting location of English users has significant impacts on the rapid growth of providers of the English Language, i.e. school/ department in the university that specializes or has English as its major, to say nothing of language institutes or courses offering English. That studying English is of high profile is true in Indonesia. A glance through the statistics will show this: In Indonesia, almost all universities across the country have English Department at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Some universities have both English education and linguistics/literature majors, some others specialize on either pre-service teacher training or English Literature only. In Yogyakarta only, there are about 19 universities offering English study programs. English Literature and English Education programs in Indonesian universities also attract significant numbers of students. In every academic year, about 50 up to 200 new students enroll to study English.

This current article is to discuss the challenges and opportunities of studying English (Literature) in Indonesia today that is surely to hit the demographic jackpot by 2045, that is, a century after the independence of the Republic of Indonesia. It is these young people, the so-called “Golden Generation” who will be running the country. They belong to the generation that has grown up with technological advancement in the likes of Play Station, smart phones, internet and, notably, social media. It will first discuss the challenges in

studying English in Indonesia amidst attempts to make education an international affair and automation that lurks behind. The second part examines the dynamic global role of English and technological innovations that can be seen as opportunities for the development of English studies in Indonesia.

CHALLENGES TO MEET

The size and speed with which global education develops is to be seen with caution. Albeit its advantages, internationalization of education is rife with profit-making that often undermines quality.

Globalization of Education

This century’s global knowledge-based economy has forced higher education worldwide to embrace the trends where universities and companies become increasingly similar to each other. As said elsewhere, the word “entrepreneurship” is often tucked into educational vision and mission at various levels in countries like China and Singapore that place economic growth as a top priority (Dewi & Pasaribu, 2015: 178). Education has truly entered a free market. International universities spread their campuses in major cities in Asia right up to South Africa. In Indonesia, state-owned and private universities have competed with each other to achieve higher place in the world-university top list. Their existence is seemingly under threat, especially when world-class professors are hired to improve the quality while increasing the attractiveness of the universities for each prospective student-buyer. Globalization of education has generated academic meritocracy in a new fashion. And such is seen as beneficial for the expansion of knowledge and economic growth of the country.

Ben Wildavsky in *The Great Brain Race: How Global Universities Are Reshaping the World* (2010) argues that the students’ and lecturers’ mobility across countries or continents, the flourishing of university branches, even the founding of universities that solely seek money should not be seen as a threat by the government or established universities. Many parties will benefit both economically and academically

with the globalization of education according to Wildskayas he observed this trend in China, India, America, Europe and the Middle East.

However, the swift evolution of global education is not without problems. Despite its tangible advantages, internationalization of education is rampant with cost-effective calculation that is sometimes demoralizing. Quality education is at stake here. To illustrate, because universities have the responsibility, among others, to produce graduates as many and as quickly as possible, the university's central role as knowledge production is dwindling. Graduates with poor English mastery as proven in their writing is evident. A cursory look at the Indonesian undergraduate and graduate theses in English Language and/or English Literature shows that they are rife with repetition and lacking of sophistication. Said earlier, the "input", i.e. what the students read and the "output", i.e. what the students write are equally poor (Dewi, 2006: 20). Many thesis writers or researchers experience rhetorical difficulty not only in conducting research but also in reporting the results to the satisfaction of international journal reviewers (Adnan, 2009).

Here we see that the urgency to partake in global education is infrequently attuned to any efforts to increase the quality of knowledge production. Research has shown that this lack of maturity often leads to students' performing instantaneous gratification such as plagiarizing their paper works (e.g. Basri & Patak, 2015, Adiningrum, 2015; Hariyanti, 2015). Plagiarism is likely to occur ever more with the upsurge of automation to which this article now turns.

Automation

Education today should inevitably compete with automation technologies, such as Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Nowadays the automation of processes in business and education alike is increasingly commonplace whereby software robots perform repetitive tasks by emulating human activities in a more effective and efficient way. As such, this robotics, AIs and numerous smart devices give impacts on education to contend with cautiously.

While it is hard to deny the benefits and efficiencies of automation in language teaching (e.g. Warschauer, 2000; Sanprasert, 2010; Chang, 2010), the role of the teachers should remain important in shaping the learners' character. In language research, such automation as corpus linguistics, MATLAB, CALL, translation machine and a variety of multimedia-based language learning should be treated as facilitators instead of taking-over the responsibilities of the lecturers. This is to say that despite the invention of automation, education is continually a complex and interlocking process. Education involves human relationships, emotion, empathy and psychological as well as spiritual experiences that machines can never replace. Automation should therefore be used instead to increase lecturers' tasks in, for instance, giving quicker feedback on students' homework and assignments, simplifying monotonous paperwork, grading students' quizzes, etc. Failure to limit the role of automation may result in disrespect to educators.

OPPORTUNITIES TO SEIZE

The spread of English and the implication thereof in curriculum, policy makers, users and providers of English should generate signs of progress in postmodernist mode. Hybridity, multimodality, anti-positivistic worldviews have all provided humanistic prospects in studying English.

Language and Literature as Empowerment

Studying English continues to draw its appeal among young generation, thanks to globalization. Curricular change is mandatory because English is now taught in multilingual contexts (Kramersch, 2006). While English curriculum should take into account internet discourse and its repercussion, i.e. linguistic diversity (Danet, 2010), pragmatic use of English in the work force is of important consideration (Roberts, 2010) in making English most useful for today's learners.

It is not uncommon, for example, to come across an Indonesian youth who has this to say: "Mampu memahami dan

menguasai bahasa Inggris di zaman now adalah harga mati” or English is a must-acquire skill today (<https://www.youthmanual.com/post/sudut-pandang/kenapa-belajar-bahasa-inggris-penting-bagi-pelajar-dan-mahasiswa-zaman-now>).

It would seem that the Millennials have found their own way to develop (English) language to be seen positively. The smartphones and various gadgets they live with everyday allow them to use English and to use it to the full and playfully at that. Among the linguistic innovations that the young people help to build are abbreviating, redefining words and verbing, one report says (Kalia, 2018). The youths use a lot of abbreviations when they text each other to convey various purposes from venting off their feelings (e.g. NITM – Not in the mood) to giving specific, personal instruction (e.g. OOTD – Outfit of the day). Redefinition of words is also popular, for instance the use of the word “woke” for being politically and socially aware and “lit” to mean amazing as in “Sarah’s birthday party was lit”. The Millennials use more and more nouns as verbs to keep pace with their increasing use of technology as in “googling”, “uberling”, “xeroxing”, etc.

Thus being said, the study of English (Literature) has the prospect to empower learners. Language develops as human beings develop. In this age of global interdependencies, the study of language should therefore be intercultural and interactive so as to create visions to explore the whole new world.

Smart Use of Smart Devices

The face of education today greatly changes with the fast expansion of technology. Teaching the Millennials means teaching students who have never experienced chalk-and-blackboard activities with their lecturers, for they are all equipped with gadgets and tablets. Smart phones, mobile computers, smart whiteboards and other related advancements have changed the nature of classroom interaction, not to mention the use of internet for long distance learning and social media for students-lecturers communication.

Rather than lamenting over the changing mode of interaction, technology

must be put into a very good use to enhance learning, taking advantage as it does of its ability to stimulate the Net Generation students’ thinking brain and multiple intelligences (Berk, 2009; Chang, 2010). Experiential learning is the model most suitable for teaching in this age of multimedia. Smart gadget must therefore be used smartly to help students gain new knowledge, insights and skills.

Transformative Learning

Built on the views of Bismoko (2009; 2011), Dewi (2012) maintains that studying English in postmodernist context should deal with interpretation of human life and human experience, that is, understanding human experience about the world. To this end, studying English Literature should be comparative, contextualized and participant-oriented, than the otherwise centralistic toward American or British Literature. Research in English using a classicist way, Bismoko claims, disregards not only the values of humanity but also a stumbling block and a big loss to the nation (2009: 8).

Consequently, studying language and literature in the present day is to uphold transformative purposes, i.e. (1) increasing the depth of appreciation on literary works and (2) providing social contribution towards the factual problems in society (Dewi, 2016). Ecological problems, human rights abuse and poverty are among the 21st century problems that research in English language and literature can help to contend with. Ecocriticism, ecofeminism, ecolinguistics and other inter-related concepts are put into use in English Studies because environmental problem is human problems that can be contextually examined. Research on Ecohumanism as an approach in studying English in Indonesian/ Asian context is aplenty (e.g. Laksmitarukmi, 2017; Indrianto, 2018; Dewi, 2018) to be further developed towards transformative learning. Accordingly, studying English today means procuring ecological insight, environmental ethics, awareness of human equity and other virtues that can be revealed and reflected upon through language and literature.

CONCLUSION

This article has revealed that forces of globalization accompanied by hurried advancement of technology have changed the nature of education including English Language and Literature teaching. Progressively using English as a *lingua franca*, the outer circle countries like Indonesia have to redefine the study of the language and its literature in terms of curriculum adjustment, methodology and research paradigm.

This article has also shown the impacts of the demographic change towards the users and providers of the English language, as well as the challenges and opportunities to cope with. Apparent lack of

maturity in language mastery (especially writing) by English graduates and the use of automation become challenges to deal with by way of (1) better knowledge production vis-à-vis quantity increase of (incompetent) graduates and (2) enhancement of lecturers' role and responsibilities to transmit knowledge and character education amidst automation-craze. As for the opportunities, English Literature teaching in Indonesia should incorporate (1) humanistic-contextual topics; (2) proficient use of technology and (3) transformative learning by opting for research that can improve human dignity, i.e. pro-environment, gender equity, peace and justice.

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