

LAMENTING LANGUAGE COURSES IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

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General Education in Higher Education

Pre-college education is mainly designed for character building, while college education is for profession building. However, on tertiary education levels students are still required to take mandatory subjects called *Mata Kuliah Dasar Umum* or General Education courses, whose function is to provide students with general knowledge—as opposed to specific knowledge or specialization—that will be useful for their career in the future.

Students and professors are great admirers and promoters of their major or field of study, say English, but blind admiration may lead to myopic and prejudiced attitude. General education is created to counter fragmentation and specialization, which characterize advanced science and technology. General education, deliberately designed to facilitate inter-department interaction, will promote knowledge democratization among students.

When it comes to employment, oftentimes what matters most is not your GPA or your specialization, but how you interact with others; that is your character! Today's students worry about jobs, and there is no harm on it, but narrow vocationalism with too much emphasis on skill training is not without danger. Liberal arts functions to keep the balance between careerism and character building

Currently the curriculum of general education consists of but not necessarily limited to the following courses: Religion, Civics, Indonesian, English, Social Science, Culture, and Technology, Seminar on Religion, Sports, and KKN or Community Service. These courses however, has always been perceived less important and less challenging than major or professional ones. Such perception is also common among college students in the U.S., where they are described as "the neglected step child of the undergraduate experience" (Boyer 1987: 83).

Boyer further elaborates that since the 1970's almost all American undergraduate programs have offered general education consisting of English, philosophy, Western civilization, the third world, and international education. More colleges offer computer literacy, math, and

arts as general education. However the students perceived the following as the most useful ones: computer literacy, English composition, mathematics, science, foreign languages, arts, literature, and history.

Problems in Academic Writing

Among the problems faced by college students is the school-college transition, namely a mismatch between faculty expectation and academic preparation of entering students. In most cases, the entering students lack the strong foundation for academic writing. This is telling enough that our basic education has failed to pave the way, namely basic literacy, for professional development. Indonesian as a general education course has been in the college curriculum since independence presumably to fix the mismatch.

My survey on general education courses, however, shows that Indonesian is perceived the least important among the general education subjects. In other words, the Indonesian course has been a waste of time and energy. It is not an exaggeration, then, to hypothesize that university graduates in general lack the ability to express their ideas in academic writing in Indonesian, let alone in English. Many proposal submitted by faculty members are turn down simply because they do not know how write a good proposal. Reading their fellowship proposals, we could easily tell that their proposals lack convincing arguments.

In 2004-2006, the Indonesian International Education Foundation or IIEF/Ford Foundation initiated a program called PPBI or *Program Peningkatan Bahasa Ilmiah*, namely of Academic Language Improvement Programs in Communicative Academic English (CAE) and Academic Writing (AW) in Indonesian in seven pilot universities. The objectives were to explore the state of the art of teaching Indonesian and English as general education courses at the target universities. The programs included: (1) socializing the vision and mission of PPBI among stakeholders on campus, (2) conducting CAE and AW trainings for newly recruited instructors, (3) developing syllabus and materials; and (4) redesigning Indonesian and English courses within the undergraduate curriculum.

An independent team of evaluators was formed to evaluate the programs. The goal was to gain information regarding: (1) the implementation of PPBI programs, (2) the benefit of the PPBI programs as well as the obstacles encountered by the PPBI management. To ensure the validity of evaluation the team did techniques such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, negative case

analysis, and member checks, all of which were completed in about three months in 2006.

The findings of the evaluation were as follows: (1) TOT was beneficial, not only improved the participants' knowledge and skill but also broadened their ELT proficiency especially of those without TEFL/TESL/ELT backgrounds. This suggests that in-service training for teachers and lecturers is essential for continuous professional development. The programs were perceived beneficial by CAE lecturers without EFL backgrounds as they got the opportunity to maintain their English proficiency.

Mostly training programs for lecturers in the pilot universities had run well. In some universities either CAE or AW training did not run well, and in a university neither CAE nor AW training ran well. This finding suggests that every university develops its own culture, which to a certain extent explains relative acceptance or resistance to innovations. In some universities innovative AW and CAE trainings for students had been executed. Problems included recruiting students, lecturer's readiness and confidence, and teaching methodology.

Almost in all the universities throughout Indonesia, there was a tendency to emphasize grammar over practice of writing and communication. This is consistent with my recent research on Indonesian as a school subject as perceived by graduate students of UPI. In retrospect they reconstructed the school subject as depicted in the following table.

What Indonesian teachers did in the class	
<i>Statement as perceived by respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1. Teachers teach grammar and literary theories.	69%
2. Teachers teach reading in general.	46%
3. Teachers recommend students to read literary works.	12%
4. Indonesian class does not improve critical thinking skills.	93%
5. Indonesian class does not improve writing skills.	80%
6. Indonesian class does not motivate students to read.	35%
7. Indonesian class does not make them proud of Indonesian.	19%

It is all evident that high school learning is not conducive enough to develop critical thinking, literary appreciation, and writing skills, all of

which are basic of liberal education, namely “to produce the active citizen who is thoroughly virtuous and universally competent, that is, the perfect orator capable of addressing any topic and assuming any position of leadership in the state.” (Kimball quoted by Crowley1998: 47).

Seven Misconceptions on Writing

Indonesian intellectuals are often criticized for their lack of ability to write. No wonder textbook production in the country is relatively low compared with that in other neighboring countries. The following misconceptions are accountable for explaining the matter.

First, high school graduates have strong foundation of academic writing in Indonesian. As indicated in the table above, the current practice of teaching Indonesian has not built the foundation for academic writing at college. That would be even more difficult to master academic writing in English.

Second, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) proficiency is independent of Indonesian for Academic Purposes (IAP) proficiency. It seems to be a natural order of acquisition to be proficient in Indonesian first and English second. How could you publish in English if you do not publish in Indonesian in the first place? In terms of publication, compared to their counterparts, intellectual graduates of universities overseas are insignificantly different. Studying overseas does not guarantee productivity. Innovative literacy teaching at pre-college levels does.

Third, Indonesian and English faculty members teach IAP and EAP more effectively than others. The teaching of IAP and EAP as general education is commonly administered by a unit independent of Indonesian and English departments. The teaching of general education courses is oftentimes mandated to young and inexperienced instructors. Thus administered, the courses lack faculty coordination.

Fourth, the inclusion of Indonesian into the college curriculum will automatically bring about positive attitude of students toward Indonesian as the national language. By way of comparison English enjoys the present status as an international language not for linguistic reasons, but for its social function, namely as the medium of intellectualization. Indonesian, to win respect and appreciation, should be used as the medium of knowledge reproduction.

Fifth, the quality of education is dependent on its curriculum. The curriculum as a document is difficult to develop, but to implement it

consistently is even more difficult. A survey on undergraduate programs in the U.S. affirms that misconception as quoted here.

“When alumni are asked what they really value in their college education, they almost never mention the curriculum or the subject matter of their courses, which fades rapidly after finals and graduation. Instead they remember the groups they joined, the teachers and students they met, the friendships they made. These memories of learning communities may be far closer to the real value of college education than the arcane debate over the undergraduate curriculum.” (Dudderstadt 2001: 76)

Sixth, a university degree is an indicator of (high) academic literacy. As reiterated earlier, writing has long been neglected in our education from elementary to tertiary. Writing proficiency should be developed over years of schooling—almost absolutely through first language. College education develops academic writing skills as part of epistemic literacy.

Seventh, bottom-up policy is always better than top-down policy on curriculum development and implementation. Oftentimes people at the grass root level are not informed about the state of the art of teaching Indonesian and English as part of general education. The university top management by virtue of their academic authority and integrity may issue recommendations on adopting innovations in teaching and learning.

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