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Research Report

Addressing the employability of SMK students through improved English curriculum

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Policy Brief No. 15

Addressing the Employability of SMK Students through Improved English Curriculum

by Latasha Safira & Fatharani Nadhira



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Key Messages

- Compared to other education levels, *Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan* (SMK) graduates were the highest contributors (11.45%) to the unemployment rate in Indonesia in February 2021. Though worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, this is largely due to the misalignment of skills being taught in school and industry needs. Employers struggle to find graduates that meet their required qualifications, especially for English competencies.
- Though SMK teachers and students generally perceive English competencies as an important skill, SMK graduates still do not meet the levels demanded by their industries. While a number of factors contribute to this problem, the overarching cause is the existing curriculum.
- The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (MOECRT) should revise the basic competencies of English studies at the SMK level to facilitate an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach and better prepare students for the job market. The new Merdeka Curriculum (*Kurikulum Merdeka*) for the SMK level should reflect basic competencies that are differentiated from the senior high school level (*Sekolah Menengah Atas*, or SMA) and should also be different across the SMK majors. MOECRT should also engage in more public-private partnerships with industry actors to gather data and develop ESP for each major in line with the industry demands.

- MOECRT should prioritize improvements in the quality of English teachers. Particularly at the SMK level. It is important to introduce English teachers to the importance of ESP so that they can teach industry-relevant English materials to their students. MOECRT can facilitate capacity building programs for SMK teachers hosted by or in partnership with industry players to ensure that teachers are keeping up with continuously evolving skill demands.
- Since language skills must be practiced often, public-private partnerships can be extended to improve infrastructure such as internet connection. Providing the necessary technology devices to support and encourage students to learn English from a variety of sources beyond the classroom helps them develop their English skills.

Relevance of English Competencies towards Employability of SMK Students



Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan (SMK), Indonesia's formal vocational school at the secondary level, is intended to prepare students with the practical skills to enter the job market. Approximately 70% of SMK graduates seek employment, while 30% continue their studies in university. According to Suharno, Pambudi and Hajanto (2020) the current local job market has an 85% absorption rate for SMK graduates. Given both the high degree of absorption and students looking for jobs upon graduation, SMKs should prepare students for the workforce by developing skills hiring managers are looking for before they graduate.

Unfortunately, in February 2021, SMK graduates were reported to be the highest contributors (approximately 11%) to the unemployment rate in Indonesia, compared to other education levels (Statistics Indonesia, 2021). While the unemployment problem was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, this is also largely due to the struggle of employers in finding graduates that meet the required qualifications for employment (Damanik, 2021). According to a report by ILO, on average, it takes about eight months for SMK students to secure their first job, but 15 months to secure stable employment (Kent, 2021).

While the misalignment of skills being taught in school and the industry needs partially explains the unemployment problem with SMK students, several reports indicate that employers specifically attribute Indonesia's youth unemployability with the significant gaps between the industry-required English proficiency, and the level attained by graduates (BAPPENAS, 2015; Nambiar et al., 2019; World Bank, 2012).



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While it is valued to varying degrees, the use of English is present in state-owned, multinational, foreign, and private companies alike (Setiawan, 2014). Employers have identified English skills as one of the top two essential skills required for future employment, alongside technology competencies (Nambiar et al., 2019). Indonesia is continually developing their international links, as foreign enterprises are increasingly investing in Indonesia, and local companies seek to expand their business internationally (ibid). Acquiring English proficiencies is becoming more critical in order to thrive in the current competitive workforce (Interview 1)¹.

The MOECRT has developed a national curriculum, as well as major-based curriculums, to guide teachers in the instruction of English studies. However, some employers have expressed dissatisfaction with the current competencies of SMK English teachers since they contribute to the graduates' inadequate level of English competencies. According to the representative from Djarum Foundation (Interview 1), English teachers should attain approximately 700 (equivalent to intermediate proficiency) as their score for the Test of English in International Communication (TOEIC)². Many teachers, especially those in rural communities, still score below. Furthermore, while MOECRT Regulation No. 16/2007 on Academic Qualification Standards and Teacher Competencies stipulates that teachers must have pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies, studies have shown that English teachers in SMKs still struggle to develop these skills, particularly those related to their pedagogy and professionalism (Hariadi, Kuswandi and Wedi, 2021; Jabri, 2017; Syamsinar and Jabu, 2016).

The MOECRT recently launched the SMK *Pusat Keunggulan* (SMK-PK) program³, a new priority initiative under the MOECRT's Directorate General Vocational Education that is part of the Merdeka Belajar scheme which aims to develop programs to generate skillful and employable future workers and entrepreneurs (Vocational Education MOECRT, 2021). Teachers at SMK-PK will undergo upskilling and reskilling to ensure their competence and knowledge match industry standards. Though this new large-scale initiative suggests that the English teaching and learning experience in SMKs will likely transform, the impact of SMK-PK and the new Merdeka Curriculum on English lessons in SMKs remains to be reviewed.

¹ CIPS conducted a study in 2021 to explore the attitudes and experiences of English within the SMK context, especially in its relation to the students' future employability. The research is based on primary data gathered from employers, SMK teachers and, and SMK students across regions, types of schools, and majors, which was collected through surveys, interviews, and a focus group discussion (FGD). A total of 3,938 SMK students and 185 teachers participated in the survey. 29 SMK teachers from 17 provinces attended the FGD. Interviews were conducted with employers to gather more information on English as a need within the job market.

² The TOEIC test scores are divided into six proficiency categories. The lowest category is basic proficiency (10 - 250) which indicates the user can only speak English for survival needs, the second lowest is elementary proficiency (255 - 400) which refers to users who have limited English skills and can only hold a simple and familiar face-to-face conversation, the third one is elementary proficiency plus (405 - 600) which indicates the users' ability to initiate and maintain direct conversation and meet limited social demands, the second highest is limited working proficiency (605 - 780) which indicates the users to acquire limited work requirements, the second highest is working proficiency plus (785 - 900), the highest one is international professional proficiency (905 - 990), which refers to speakers who can utilize English effectively in any situation.

³ This program is currently carried out in selected SMKs in Indonesia, where they are required to establish partnerships with relevant business and industry players, local government, and polytechnics to support their development. Since SMK-PK is part of the Merdeka Belajar initiative and is therefore qualified to test the MOECRT's new Merdeka Curriculum since last year.



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Attitudes and Experiences of SMK Teachers towards English

Based on data gathered from CIPS' study, most of the SMK English teachers from the survey (70%) rated that English is important for employability, while all the teachers in the FGD agreed that English is especially valuable for SMK students to compete in the job market. They observed that the majority of their SMK alumni with better English competencies had better employment outcomes⁴. SMK English teachers from the survey believe that in both local and foreign companies alike, employees will most likely interact with foreigners at some point, whether they are managers, trainers, or investors. Therefore, in order for students to compete in such a multinational job market, they must equip themselves with a certain level of English competencies during their studies.

However, when asked about the current SMK English curriculum, only 5% of the teacher respondents from CIPS' survey rated the curriculum as "very effective" in equipping and improving the students' skills for future employment, as it is too general for the respective SMK majors. Students in Indonesia are only required to achieve levels of English proficiencies that are reflected in the core competencies and the basic competencies, as regulated in MOECRT Regulation No. 37/2018⁵, which do not specify any differences in the requirement to fulfill specific levels of English competencies at the SMA / MA (*Madrasah Aliyah*, or Islamic senior high school) / SMK / MAK (*Madrasah Aliyah Kejuruan*, or Islamic vocational school) levels. Consequently, this has affected the way in which SMK students are able to develop their English competencies in a way that improves their employability. As much as 38% of the teachers at the FGD have expressed frustrations that the 2013 SMK curriculum for English is very similar to that of high schools, which therefore does not prepare them well for the demands in the job market.

Teachers believe that the English curriculum for SMKs should be much more focused on ESP⁶. Though MOECRT Regulation No. 464/D.D5/KR/2018⁷ states that English lessons should be adjusted to their respective majors, in practice this is not translated to the English curriculum for SMK as the regulation also does not differentiate the competencies required across SMK majors. Several studies on multiple SMKs have also found that the teaching material and syllabus does not follow the ESP approach (Fadlia et al., 2020; Mulyah & Aminatun, 2020; Ronaldo, 2016). Only 3 out of 29 teachers from the FGD have taken on the responsibility to prepare major-relevant English lessons. However, they expressed that the process of seeking their own materials that align with both the students' needs and the industry requirements is a time-consuming process. Therefore, these teachers seek more support in terms of the availability and variety of relevant English learning materials.

⁴ Many of the SMK teachers believe English competencies are important in the SMK graduates' efforts to secure employment since they view it as a current "industry demand", which is heavily impacted by globalization and Indonesia's transition towards Industry 5.0. According to the Ministry of Investments (MOI, previously known as Badan Koordinasi Penanaman Modal/BKPM), there were a total of 25,919 foreign companies in Indonesia by the end of 2019 (MOI, 2020). While these foreign companies only make up approximately 3.8% of the total registered companies, English competencies are also perceived as a valuable skill within local companies.

⁵ Regulation on the Amendments to MOECRT Regulation No. 24/2016 on Core Competencies and Basic Competencies of Subjects in the 2013 Curriculum in Primary Education and Secondary Education.

⁶ The English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach is designed for teaching English according to the students' respective majors. The goal of ESP is to ensure that students are learning and developing their English competencies in a way that matches the needs of industry.

⁷ Regulation on the Core Competencies and Basic Competencies of Subjects at the SMK Level.

Attitudes and Experiences of SMK Students towards English



Based on CIPS' survey, most of the students believe that English skills are generally very important to learn and 53% of students have also linked the importance of English competence with their career goals. However, like the teachers, most of these students do not find the materials provided for their English studies at school as relevant to their respective majors. Out of the nine umbrella majors in SMKs, only the majority of students from Health and Social Work, Tourism, and Maritime Studies majors perceive that their school's English lessons are adjusted to their major. This finding is consistent with the existing literature, as well as the teacher survey and FGD results, that found that many SMKs in Indonesia do not teach ESP to their students (Yuana, 2013).

Moreover, more than half of the students mentioned that they receive less than two hours of English lessons per week at school, while only 38% study English within the allotted time mandated in the MOECRT Curriculum Structure for SMK⁸. This result is also similar across school types (public or private). Meanwhile, schools in other ASEAN countries study English at the secondary level for a minimum of six hours per week (MOECRT, 2017). This indicates that with the current allocated time, SMK students do not get enough time to learn and practice the English language at schools, thus impeding meaningful development of their English language skills.

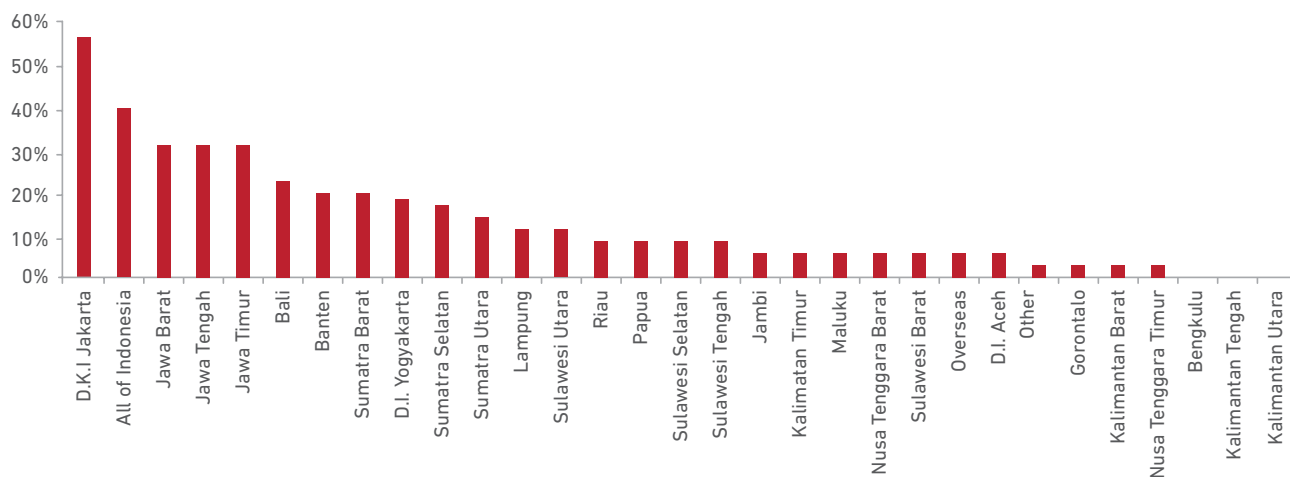
Nevertheless, some students have shown attempts to learn English from other means beyond their school materials. Though 97% of the SMK students surveyed are not currently enrolled in any formal English courses or tutoring⁹ outside of school, many of them indicated that they use online learning platforms such as Duolingo and Ruangguru, among many others, to support their English studies. Many students use more than one platform to learn English. Many of these apps are free or offer free trials for their users, thus attracting students to try the platforms to support their studies. In addition, the use of online platforms provides students with more flexibility in improving their English proficiencies. This indicates that while the majority of students only learn English for less than two hours at school, some try to continue to develop their English competencies outside of school.

⁸ According to the Regulation of the Director General of Primary and Secondary Education No. 07/D.D5/KK/2018 on the Curriculum Structure for SMK/MAK, English is to be studied for 3 hours for Grades 10-11 and 2 hours for Grades 12-13 (if applicable).

⁹ This refers to physical extracurricular classes for English which involves support from and direct contact with an expert educator.

Although students across geographical locations may utilize online learning platforms to supplement their studies, there remains a stark difference between students from urban areas and rural areas. As depicted in Figure 1, the education technology (EdTech) market coverage remains concentrated in the island of Java (Bhardwaj, Yarrow & Cali, 2020). This can also be explained by the uneven infrastructure development across the archipelago as the main challenge. Students living in rural areas may not have strong enough internet connectivity to support their online learning, compared to those living in urban areas. Furthermore, device ownership is also a significant barrier as the majority of EdTech firms in Indonesia deliver their service via browser or web application (ibid), which would be more convenient to use with a laptop. However, less than 15% of children living in rural areas have laptops that are required to access these online learning platforms (UNICEF, 2021). That is not that urban children do not struggle as well, as the same report indicates that only 25% of children living in urban areas have laptops.

Figure 1.
Distribution of EdTech firms by geographic penetration of their products.



Source: Bhardwaj, Yarrow & Cali (2020)

Policy Recommendations

Given the insights gathered, the following policy recommendations can be made to improve English teaching and learning in SMKs, which would consequently improve SMK student achievements and employability:

1. Revision of basic competencies of English studies at the SMK level to facilitate an ESP approach and better prepare students for the job market

As the MOECRT is currently working on revising the basic and core competencies for the graduate skill standardization, Merdeka Curriculum for the SMK level should generally reflect basic competencies that are differentiated from the SMA level. As the majority of students seek employment upon graduation, distinguishing the basic competencies for SMK from that for SMA will better support the SMK students' learning goals. Therefore, an ESP approach to English studies is more appropriate in the context of SMKs, where the basic competencies listed in the MOECRT's regulations also differ across majors depending on the industry-demanded skills of each umbrella major.

2. Encourage more public-private partnerships between MOECRT and industry to develop ESP for each major

Considering that SMKs students are projected to enter the workforce upon graduation, it is important to equip them with English skills relevant to the industry and business demand. It would be useful for MOECRT collect data on the baseline requirements for English competencies from each major area, as different industries expect different proficiency levels. Insights gathered from the baseline requirements can be used to inform a better English curriculum development, specifically with an ESP approach.

3. Diversifying learning resources available to support the ESP approach

MOECRT should ensure the availability of learning resources such as textbooks, multimedia, and EdTech that can support the ESP approach. It is important that MOECRT's recommended books are adjusted to each major, and especially distinguishable from textbooks used in SMA. With greater provision of diverse resources, teachers can be granted more autonomy and flexibility to explore their pedagogies and meet the learning needs of their students, especially in respect to their majors. The wide availability of ESP resources also facilitates independent learning for students to develop their English competencies in a way that appropriately matches their industry's demands.

4. Prioritize improvements in the quality of English teachers

It is important to emphasize the significance of ESP to SMK English teachers so that they can teach relevant English materials for the students. This can be done through ESP capacity building programs. Additional training with up-to-date curriculums that reflects the current needs of the industry should also be accessible and encouraged for teachers to take. Furthermore, increased engagements between SMK English teachers and industry representatives may also improve teachers' understanding and capacity in teaching English according to industry needs. MOECRT can facilitate seminars and discussions hosted by industry players for SMK teachers to ensure that teachers are keeping up with the hiring trends and skill demands which are continuously evolving. Through these partnerships, teachers may be better able to adjust their lesson plans according to current and future demands of the industry.

5. Improve infrastructures to facilitate students' supplementary learning

Learning English beyond the classroom setting is important considering language skills must be practiced as often as possible. The survey demonstrates that many students use EdTech to learn English outside the classroom, despite the proportion of those utilizing EdTech is far less than those who do not use EdTech at all. Public-private partnerships can also be extended to improve infrastructure such as internet connection and provide the necessary technology devices to support and encourage students to learn English from a variety of sources, subsequently helping them to understand and develop their English proficiencies better.

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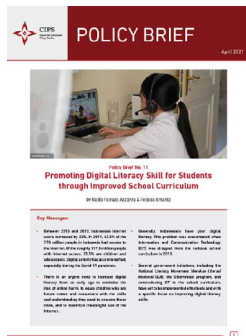


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