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SM-3T PROGRAM AND EFL TEACHERS' QUALITY: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: This qualitative study aims at finding out whether or not Indonesian Government Program named SM-3T (*Sarjana Mendidik di Daerah Terdepan, Terluar dan Tertinggal*) is effective to improve Indonesian EFL teachers' quality. This SM-3T Program is a program designed by the Indonesian Government for fresh graduates to teach for a year in disadvantaged, foremost, and outermost areas throughout Indonesia. Additionally, it also seeks to reveal and identify the difficulties that they have encountered when they were teaching in those areas and how those challenges could be turned out to be good opportunities for their future teaching career. The selected informants are 10 SM-3T teachers who have been back from their teaching areas. Questionnaire and interview have been used as the instruments for data collection. The results reveal that these teachers faced many various physical, socio-economic and cultural challenges during their teaching period. They had to struggle to be able to adapt with the local culture to survive. However, they have also admitted that those challenges have changed their perceptions about the importance of education in general and the need to urgently improve themselves in EFL teaching in particular.

Keywords: SM-3T Program, EFL, Teachers' Quality, Opportunities, Challenges

Introduction

Indonesia is a big country which consists of 34 provinces, 416 regencies/98 cities, 7.094 districts, and 8.480 sub-districts/74.957 villages (as of 2018 July). Below is the map of Indonesia with its administrative division.



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subdivisions_of_Indonesia

122 out of 416 regencies have been designated by Mr. Joko Widodo as the President of Indonesia as underdeveloped regions during the period of 2015-2019 that has been officially stated in the Presidential Regulation, Number 131/2015, concerning Determination of Disadvantaged Regions in 2015-2019. The areas classified as underdeveloped ones are those whose regions and communities are less developed compared to other regions on a national scale. These 122 regencies are also known as disadvantaged, foremost, and outermost areas or in Bahasa it is called *daerah 3T (Terdepan, Terluar, dan Tertinggal)*.

This SM-3T term is particularly used in an education program established by Indonesian government as one of the efforts to improve the quality of education in Indonesia, especially in rural schools. The term 3T itself refers to disadvantaged, foremost, and outermost which is in accordance with the condition as well as the location where these areas are situated. Disadvantaged areas are those which are far behind in many ways compared to the ones in big cities or urban areas, in terms of teaching facilities, technology, and human resources (i.e. good qualified teachers). Foremost areas are the areas which are located in the front line of Indonesia. They are the borderline areas with neighboring countries, such as the Provinces of NTT (East Nusa Tenggara), Papua, Aceh, North Sulawesi, West Kalimantan and East Kalimantan. Outermost areas refer to the areas outside Java.

A Brief Description of SM-3T Program

The program of SM-3T is for fresh graduates majoring in *Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan* (the Faculty of Teacher Training and Educational Science). Its main aim is to overcome shortage of teachers in a short period of time (one year). The issue of educational equality has become another aim of this program, which is to solve the problem of educational inequality because everyone should have similar opportunities in life, including opportunity in getting education. Additionally, this program has also been designed to prepare all the teacher participants to become not only professional teachers but also high qualified educators in their future career.

All fresh graduates who graduated from the Faculty of Teacher Training and Educational Science are welcome to apply to be included in a competitive selection process. The process will cover several stages, namely administration test as the first stage, the second stage is testing and assessment of academic potential and the interview section will be held in the last stage.

Based on the data taken from various national newspapers, both online and offline, this program has already had more than ten thousand graduates who have joined and experienced teaching in 3T areas. There have been seven batches sent to 3T areas through this program before the government has finally

decided to revisit the program to end in 2017. There were 2.465 participants in the first batch for academic year 2011-2012 and 2.670 participants involved in the second batch which started from 2012-2013. The third batch was sent in 2013-2014 and there were 2.803 participants and 3.000 participants were sent in batch four to teach in the academic year of 2014-2015. The last two batches were held in the academic years of 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. Batch five sent 3.000 participants and the last batch sent 1.000 participants.

No more SM-3T participants were sent to 3T areas after 2017 because the program no longer exists. However, The Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education has come to the decision of revising this program to change with a similar program with better effectiveness. Although this program has come to an end, various achievements have been recorded, such as: it has been recorded by World of Records Museum – Indonesia as the most successful program for sending many teachers to 3T areas; it is one of the most favorite programs for non-civil servants to empower the fresh graduates of undergraduate level; it has been designed to be able to create reliable and trustworthy teachers; despite its temporary status, this program has already become the answer of the education inequality problem in Indonesia; and it has created more than 10.000 reliable and qualified teachers in which many of them have been selected as professional and certified teachers.

Based on the overview earlier, this paper aims at finding out whether or not Indonesian Government Program named SM-3T (*Sarjana Mendidik di Daerah Terdepan, Terluar dan Tertinggal*) is effective to improve Indonesian EFL teachers' quality. Besides, it also seeks to reveal and identify teachers' difficulties when they were teaching in those areas and how those challenges could be turned out to be good opportunities for their future teaching career.

Literature Review

The difficulty of teaching in rural schools has been a trending topic to be studied by many experts. They come up with many valuable results stating that generally, teaching in rural schools is difficult and teaching English either as a Second (ESL) or a Foreign Language (EFL) is even more complicated with all the challenges faced by both teachers and students (Holguin & Morales, 2016; Brown, 2003; Cruz-Arcila, 2013). This complexity has become the main reason why not many teachers want to teach in rural schools (UNESCO, 2011).

The issues of differences in cultural, tradition, socio-economic, environmental and education quality aspects between urban and rural schools are the causes of rural teachers' shortage (Brown, 2003; Cruz-Arcila, 2013; Perfetti, 2005; Moulton, 2001; Barley & Bringham, 2005) and this kind of problems also exists in rural schools in Indonesia. Most students in rural areas still use their local languages in daily communication (Nababan, 1991) and language differences also create problem for teachers, especially for those who do not share the same languages.

Those problems mentioned above have made many teachers reluctant to teach in rural schools and most of them choose to teach urban students. This phenomenon leads to the imbalance of educational opportunity and quality between urban and rural schools in Indonesia. Good qualified teachers tend to teach in urban areas and as a consequence the quality of education in rural schools tends to be poor.

It is generally believed that most rural school teachers do not have adequate competence to teach EFL because they almost never use effective teaching methods, such as, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This method is assumed to be quite hard to be implemented due to all the limitations in terms of situations and conditions of teaching and learning (Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004; Lai, 1994; Tipka, 2004). Another critical issue is teachers' poor quality in English skill. The teaching and learning process will not become efficient if teachers use local languages as classroom language of instruction most of the time (Sullivan, 2011). The use of English as the medium of instruction is essential for students' language exposure. It can be started from giving simple instructions and asking easy questions during the lesson period (Nation, 2003). Students' motivation is another problematic issue in teaching and learning EFL in rural schools. As mentioned earlier, most rural students tend to use their local languages in their daily lives and this makes them have low motivation in learning English. Having no motivation to learn a language means having no effort nor willingness as well as no positive attitudes towards the language (Gardner, 1985) and this will create failure in learning.

Positive changes have to be made to change the classroom atmosphere which will eventually change not only EFL teaching and learning situation but also students' quality. The first change has to be started from teachers as the executors. If teachers are good then they will teach well using great methods to create better students. This is why, the Indonesian government has established a program, called SM-3T to start the changes by sending fresh graduates whom are considered qualified to teach students in 3T/rural schools for one year.

Methodology

There were 10 EFL teachers which consisted of 6 teachers who taught in the provinces of North and East Kalimantan (Nunukan, Malinau and Kutai Barat Regencies) from November 2012 to October 2013 and the other 4 taught in the province of Papua (Deiya and Mappi Regencies) from November 2014 to October 2015 through SM-3T Program.

The instruments used to collect the data were questionnaire and interview. The questions in the questionnaire were focused on the teachers' motivations in joining the program of SM-3T; their impressions of several important aspects, namely, the places where they lived, the schools where they taught, the local teachers, the students, the teaching - learning atmosphere, parents of their students and local society; the students' motivation in learning English; and the most important question is about whether or not it was difficult for them to teach English in the schools in 3T or rural areas. In the interview section, they were asked further questions (elicitation) about their answers in the questionnaire (i.e. data triangulation) and also about how their teaching experience as SM-3T teachers had contributed to their teaching career after the program.

The answers to the questions of the questionnaire and interview have been qualitatively analysed and the explanation will be provided in a more detailed description based on the participant teachers' answers in the results and discussion part.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study will be divided into three parts in order to answer the research questions. The first part is about the difficult circumstances which are considered as challenges faced by the teachers

during their one year teaching period, the next part relates to the strategies used by these SM-3T teachers to cope with the challenges and the last one is about teachers' opportunities achieved through the program.

Difficult Circumstances: Challenges

The results of this study have shown that each and every teacher had reason(s) why they were interested in joining SM-3T Program. It is believed that their reasons are important to be identified in order to measure their motivation and willingness to face the challenge they found during their teaching period in 3T schools. Although they had different ways in expressing their answers but it can be concluded that having a new and great experience has come up as the most dominant reason of joining this program.

All of them had known earlier that they would have faced various challenging situations but they still decided to accept those new challenging experience. They further explained that by accepting those challenges they would become better teachers in the future. They believed that their characters could be better shaped by traveling to new places far from home for quite a long time and adapting to new lives, cultures and traditions. Another dominant reason is that they had strong motivation to improve students' English skills by becoming English teachers for a year through this program.

The difficult circumstances have been expressed through their answers to the questions which relate to their impressions of their experience living and teaching in those disadvantaged, foremost, and outermost areas. These difficult circumstances had been seen as challenges they had to face during the teaching period. In this discussion part, what has been classified as challenges will be divided into three categories of aspect, they are, physical, socio-economic, and cultural.

Based on the data of questionnaire and interview, after spending their time living among the local community for about one year, these teachers then had various impressions on many things dealing with their main job as English teachers in those areas. They narratively expressed their impressions on the place where they used to live, the school where they used to teach, the local teachers, students as well as their parents as described below:

Basically, they had both good and bad impressions. They all had good impression about local people in the rural areas of Kalimantan and Papua. According to them, local people were nice and friendly. The locals really welcomed them as visitors to their villages and made them feel like home. In spite of the background differences related to ethnicity, religion, race, *and social* groups, the locals held tightly to issues of tolerance, solidarity and fraternity. Another positive impression was about the places where they lived and worked. They said those places were such great places with beautiful scenery. They were rich in natural resources with fertilized soil and productive land.

Despite the facts that there was warm welcome by the locals and that the places were such great ones as favourable impressions, the teachers of SM3T, on the other hand, also had unfavourable impressions while they were teaching in the rural areas in the provinces of Kalimantan and Papua. Having the experience to live in remote areas for one year was a precious but somehow suffering moment for these teachers. They had to get used to live in places where all kind of services were limited and difficult to access. This condition had never been faced by them when they were in their places of origin.

Important services, such as clean water, power and sewerage supply, communications and community infrastructure were less widely available in these 3T areas.

The general condition of these 3T areas in Kalimantan and Papua is more or less similar, as mentioned here: there was lack of infrastructure; the quality of access to and from these areas was poor; there was limited access of transportation (there were so many big rivers, especially, in the provinces of Kalimantan that almost all people used the unique traditional slender boat called *ketinting* as the main transportation); there was lack of communication service (it was difficult to have full signal strength for mobile phones as well as internet connection); and there was limited access to both electricity and clean water. In this paper, all these challenges are grouped into the aspect of physical constraints. Other constraints relate to physical matters such as, lack of resources (text book, dictionary, et cetera) and the distance between their houses and schools which was considered too far to walk without having breakfast were also mentioned by these teachers.

The most dominant unfavourable impressions of theirs was about the issues of education, particularly, about EFL teaching and learning. The quality of human resources which is seen as the critical factor in education was still poor in these areas. People were not aware of the importance of education. In some places, going to school was not a 'must' but a 'choice' because for the locals, school was not a place to gain knowledge and be educated but only a place to get a certificate. Many students did not attend the class for days and even weeks because they had to help their parents to work in the rice fields and/or rubber gardens. In short, parents almost never provided support for their children in education. They put all responsibilities in teachers' hands. This created many dropouts and led to early marriages.

In the process of teaching English, these teachers of SM-3T found difficulty in motivating and encouraging students to learn EFL as they had low motivation towards this subject. Some students even argued that they did not have to learn English because they had their own language to be used in communication. Other expressions given by the students as excuses to skip English class were; they did not have to be able to speak English because there were not any tourists from English speaking countries who would come to visit their places, and English was not really important for them because they were not western people and so they preferred to use their local languages. In this case, they did not see English as an important subject to learn and this made them lazy to attend English class. The use of the local language had become another problem which created communication breakdown between teachers of SM3T and their students. Students mostly used their native language in daily communication. Bahasa Indonesia was rarely used and could not be spoken well by most students. It made teachers difficult to explain the lesson in Bahasa Indonesia as a language of instruction. These teachers could not use the students' local language as the language of instruction because teachers did not speak the language. This kind of challenge is classified as the big cultural constraint in teaching English as a foreign language to the students in these areas.

Having low level or even no motivation at all in learning English made the students to not want to deal with homework. Both local teachers and teachers of SM3T kept giving them homework to do at home but only few students had motivation to do it. The students did not get used to study at home because they used their after-school time to help their parents to make a living. This can be included in the constraints of socio-economic aspect.

Before the teachers of SM-3T arrived, the students of several schools in Kalimantan had not had English lessons at all because no English teachers was available in the schools. Some teachers of other subjects, such as religious education, Bahasa Indonesia, et cetera had to teach English if this situation occurred. EFL teachers who were locals had different ways of teaching from the ones performed by SM-3T teachers. Most local teachers, either in Kalimantan or in Papua taught in a teacher-centered way and used their local languages as the medium of instruction (students just passively listened to their teachers), while student-centered way was used by teachers of SM3T in order to motivate students to be active in the teaching learning process in the classroom. Another difference was shown by the level of willingness to teach. Local teachers were not very serious and did not really prepare themselves to teach because they had already been familiar with the condition that students did not really want to learn English and join the activities in the classroom. On the other hand, SM3T teachers tried to find interesting ways to motivate and encourage the students in learning English.

All of the three aspects (physical, socio-economic, and cultural) contributed to the students' discouragement in education in general, and learning English in particular. The challenges described earlier have a great contribution to the poor quality of teaching learning process in the EFL classroom in these rural schools. English teachers of SM-3T program tried hard to cope with teaching English in a difficult situation in order to create better teaching atmosphere and give good motivation for their students.

Strategies to face the Challenges

Based on the results, it has been revealed that basically, all teachers of SM-3T program felt that it was hard for them for the first time teaching in 3T/rural areas of Kalimantan and Papua. They had to keep up with new living and teaching situations which were not easy. As teachers of English as a Foreign Language, they had to convince their students that learning English was not useless as they thought but important for them and they also had to be able to show the students the importance of learning English. Their main job was to deal with the constraints of physical, socio-economy, and cultural aspects in the process of teaching and learning. It is clear to see the findings of the study through the questionnaire and interview that all these teachers had to use strategies in facing the challenges in their teaching period. The first strategy related to teaching methods. Student-centered method and simple tasks related to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) were provided by these teachers in teaching and learning process. They chose this strategy because they wanted to make the students active in the classroom. It did not work for the first two or three meetings, but it went well after that. The students could interact with both teachers and peers.

Positive feedback was considered as another effective strategy for these teachers to motivate the students. Giving motivation, reward, and compliment were included in their feedback and given to students in the classroom during teaching and learning process. By giving reward and compliment, the students would feel that their efforts were appreciated by their teachers and they would keep doing the good work.

The third strategy implemented by the SM-3T teachers were being creative in teaching by using interesting techniques and media, such as discussion, practice, question and answer, and games and songs. All of these techniques could make students interested in learning the lesson. In this case, teachers tried to create a fun learning situation by using interesting and fun teaching media. By doing this, students would not be aware that they were in teaching and learning atmosphere because the process of teaching and

learning was not conducted in an official and serious way. After the students felt relaxed and started enjoying the lesson, the teachers would implement another strategy, which was to give homework to students. The teachers thought that no matter how lazy the students were in doing it, task in the form of homework had to be assigned to give them valuable work to do while they were home. If students did not want to study and do homework, teachers would make personal approach to them to find out what seemed to be the problem and tried to help them out.

There were several teachers who also made a good effort to establish an English club as an extra-curricular activity because they found out that students in those schools did not really like learning in the classroom in a formal teaching situation. They then used this club to teach these students in a different setting. Through this club, they could do various activities using English. The last strategy used by the teachers in facing the challenges was to visit the students and their parents in their free time. During the visiting time, teachers would take time to meet both students and their parents to share experience. In this case, teachers would emphasize more on the importance of education in general and the advantages of learning English in particular.

All the previously mentioned strategies were done by the SM-3T teachers in facing the challenges in order to change the teaching and learning conditions.

Transforming Challenges to Opportunities

All the hardships faced by the SM-3T teachers have become great experiences and life lessons for them after finishing the program. They came back home after one year teaching in disadvantaged, foremost, and outermost areas and started building their teaching career. They all had similar answers that all the challenges they have been through could finally be transformed into opportunities in their recent and even future career.

Their answers have indicated that by joining SM-3T program, they could gain many advantages which have been seen as opportunities, as follows:

When they were assessed and evaluated to become English teachers with the status of civil servant, they could achieve great score in the selection test. In this case, they have been admitted as qualified and professional teachers.

All of the ex-SM-3T teachers who applied for the position of civil servant passed in the selection and are now teaching in rural schools in several different provinces in Indonesia.

Teaching in rural schools is no longer a serious problem for them because they have already been able to cope up with the situation. They get used and can easily adapt to live in rural areas and teach in rural schools.

They have proved in the selection process that their teaching performance is better than other fresh graduates who never joined the SM-3T Program. They have good skills in creating teaching tools to be used in teaching.

They have better motivation in teachers' Continued Professional Development (CPD). They always join several Professional Development activities, such as attending workshops/seminar/conferences, publishing papers in national and international journals and pursuing their degree to higher education.

Looking at the results and discussion above, it can be clearly stated that Indonesian Government Program named SM-3T (*Sarjana Mendidik di Daerah Terdepan, Terluar dan Tertinggal*) is effective to improve Indonesian EFL teachers' quality. It is implied that although this program no longer exists, it has already proved itself as an effective program to create qualified and professional teachers. The important point to be noted here is the quality improvement of teachers will eventually lead to the better quality of students.

Conclusion

Teaching is not simply a matter of delivering information from teachers to students, and learning is not simply getting information from teachers. Many aspects have to become the main concern of teachers in creating a positive atmosphere in the teaching-learning process in the classroom. Teachers have a big responsibility in this process, no matter where they are teaching, either in urban or rural areas. All students have a similar need, that is, to gain knowledge under their teachers' control.

When they are given an option, then almost all teachers prefer not to teach in schools in rural areas which are considered poor and disadvantaged. However, it is challenging to teach in difficult circumstances where teachers can really use all their teaching power to be able to not only teach but also motivate and change the students' attitudes. This sensation can only be felt by those who are teaching in a real 'conflict' areas of teaching and learning process.

As a teacher, it is your individual call, either to deal with 'a single teaching activity' in cities, stay in the comfort zone and win yourself as a teacher or to deal with 'all in one teaching activity', be brave, move out of the comfort zone and create a winning team for you and your students!

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