High School Students' Foreign Language Acquisition and Their English Achievement

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Abstract

This present study aims to examine language proficiency levels of high school students in particular assessment form and describe how such level of skills is appropriately matched for particular level of learners. While a proper language literacy investigation may be biased to perception that it can fairly measures students' comprehension, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories view that learner's age may influence how they acquire a new language. In responding to such issue, this observational study seeks for the information through document observation on students' scores of an English test conducted by the school as the main data. This observation allows the researchers to analyze the scores and describe it according to justified language competency and language acquisition. The data are classified and clarified by underpinning the theories related to the issues. The result showed that senior high school students generally obtain average scores that allow them to be categorized as Minimal and Basic level of proficiency. As per this level, the justification of language acquisition reveals that the students are included in pre-production and early production stage. Students in this stage are considered able to have average competency, especially in receptive English.

Keywords: *Language; Competency; Language Acquisition; Senior High School Students*

Introduction

English as a skill refers to one's ability to cultivate, use or implement the use of English in various contexts both orally and in writing (Chang, 2011; Tsou & Chen, 2019). In this century, English is not only seen as a foreign language that can be ruled out, but is an international language that can offer great opportunities to anyone who masters it. This is a whip for schools and educational institutions to prepare their students to be able to master English skills and facilitate this with an objective and comprehensive literacy measurement system. This raises the perception that language literacy for all circles can be measured and assessed using the same format. On the other hand, research shows that measuring one's level of English literacy must be adjusted to the characteristics of certain groups of

students, including their age and language acquisition (Hartman, Nicolarakis, & Wang, 2019; Paepe, ZHu, & Depryek, 2018).

In general, mastery of English skills or literacy can be categorized into several groups based on the underlying theoretical umbrella. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) states that a person's level of proficiency in English can be classified as beginner, intermediate, advanced, and advanced (Sandrock, Swender, Cowles, Martin, & Vicars, 2015). On the other hand, the CEFR divides English proficiency into six levels; beginner, basic, intermediate down, medium up, advanced, expert (Unit, 2011). Basically, several types of grouping refer to the same concept and also each grouping together has a description of the extent to which language skills are mastered for each level. The difference in the grouping of these categories is based more on the specifications or details of the level division and the descriptions that follow (ACTFL, 2015). In various contexts and types of measurement or assessment of English proficiency, the existing levels of the CEFR are more frequently used. This is due to several reasons. First, the breadth of its scope can represent all English skills. Second, the descriptions presented for each level are clear enough to make it easier for readers to understand the meaning of the categories of language acquisition they get. And finally, this category can be implemented for students of all levels of education. Especially for the third consideration, this needs to be considered considering that differences in the level of education of students when learning a language will affect their achievement.

Tabel 1. English Competency Level

Score	Level of proficiency	SLA Stage
0-30	Minimal	Silent or receptive stage (preproduction)
31-40	Pre-basic	
41-50	Basic	Early production
51-60	Pre-intermediate	
61-70	Intermediate	Speech emergence
71-80	Pre-advanced	
81-90	Advanced	Intermediate fluency
91-100	Proficient	

Source: (Gestanti, Colliver dan *Robertson, K. and Ford, K.*)

Foreign language acquisition is strongly influenced by internal and external factors. The internal factors include age, personality, experience, cognition or learning style, motivation, mother tongue, and talent. Meanwhile, the external factors are curriculum, classroom materials and instructions, culture, economic status, and opportunities to access or connect with foreigners (Ozfidan & Burlbaw, 2019; Zashchitina & Moysyak, 2017). Among the factors mentioned above, one of the factors that have a considerable influence on language acquisition is age. The age factor is said to be very crucial because a person's level of understanding of a language is determined by how far he is able to combine his intelligence, understanding, and experience in using a language. In general, age in language acquisition is divided into three categories, namely children (before 14 years of age), adolescents (ages 14 to 19 years), and adults (after 19 years of age) (Ozfidan & Burlbaw, 2019).

Many previous studies have examined the effect of age on foreign language acquisition. However, most of them focus more on the categories of children or adults (Anil, 2015; Aydın, 2018; Liu, 2009; Paepe et al., 2018; Rodriguez-Tamayo & Tenjo-Macias, 2019). Rarely there are studies that examine how teenagers learn English and the results they should have obtained at that age. Only a few studies have examined foreign language acquisition in adolescence or schooling, and even then only examined the factors that influence language acquisition, not its appropriateness with academic achievement (Møller & Jørgensen, 2013; Zhu & Zhou, 2012). Adolescents are an age group that is still in junior high and high school. Thus, their educational, teaching, material, interaction, and intelligence environment is able to support them to learn vocabulary, pronunciation, language structure and language

skills that make them achieve language acquisition at a certain level. What needs to be underlined is that students must know at what stage they are based on the category of stages of acquiring a foreign language. So that in the future they can find out how far the competencies they should have achieved and how long it is likely that they can achieve mastery of the language.

This research focuses on observing students' competency and their language acquisition in a private senior high school under Muhammadiyah educational management, a recognized organization in Indonesia. In this school, students are asked to take an English test to measure their general English competency. A standardized English test that is also used in other educational institutions is employed. Thus, this study is conducted to observe in what language acquisition stage the students' are supposed to be at according to their English competency result.

Methods

This study was conducted in three stages including data collection, data analysis, and data presentation. In collecting the data, written-document observation is employed (Sudaryanto, 2015). The main data in this study is prepared English score obtained from an English test conducted by the teacher and a teaching diary written by the teacher. Once the data are collected, the analysis is conducted by justifying the students' score to standardized level of English competency adapted from CEFR (Unit, 2011) and foreign language acquisition (Hill & Björk, 2008). In addition, theoretical concepts related to the issue of language acquisition from previously published studies are employed as secondary data to complement the primary data. In the last stage, the results of data analysis are presented in form of descriptive approach.This approach is considered applicable as referred to the nature, types, and techniques used in obtaining information. A summary table and figure are also provided to generally present the results. Therefore, the main finding of this study is supposed to scaffold the English competency obtained by the students as well as the level of language acquisition the students are probably at.

Result and Discussion

Students' English competencies are derived from the results of an English Language examination carried out by the teacher. The generated scores then categorized according to the level at the CEFR. Competency in this study refers to students' ability in solving text-based questions in an online test conducted by the teacher. The test is generally covers listening and reading questions. In this case, the researchers do not provide the tests directly to the participants due to the pandemic Covid-19. Instead, document observation is conducted to observe the ready-calculated scores provided by the schools. After that, the scores are justified and categorized according to the level of English proficiency under CEFR standard. Based on the analysis of document observation regarding the English scores of 30 students, the results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Justification of Students' Competency Score to CEFR

No	Student's ID	Score	No	Student's ID	Score
1	S19	47	16	S2	32
2	S7	46	17	S12	30
3	S8	44	18	S30	29
4	S15	44	19	S9	28
5	S16	42	20	S17	24
6	S13	42	21	S22	24
7	S3	41	22	S25	23
8	S27	41	23	S5	21
9	S28	40	24	S6	21
10	S14	39	25	S21	21
11	S20	38	26	S23	20
12	S29	37	27	S24	19
13	S1	35	28	S18	16
14	S4	34	29	S11	13
15	S26	33	30	S10	11

Table 2 presents the English competency scores of Muhammadiyah Senior High School students sorted from the highest to the lowest one. In the table, it can be seen that the highest English competency score is 47 while the lowest is 11. Referring to the English competency level that has been described in table 1, students with scores of 0-30 have a minimum competency level and students with values 31-40 are included in the Pre-Basic category. In addition, if students have a score of 41-50 then they have Basic competence. Based on the scores in table 2, it can be seen that out of 30 students, 8 students fall into the Basic competency category, 8 students are known to have Pre-Basic competence, and 14 others have Minimum competency. The summary is provided in Figure 1.
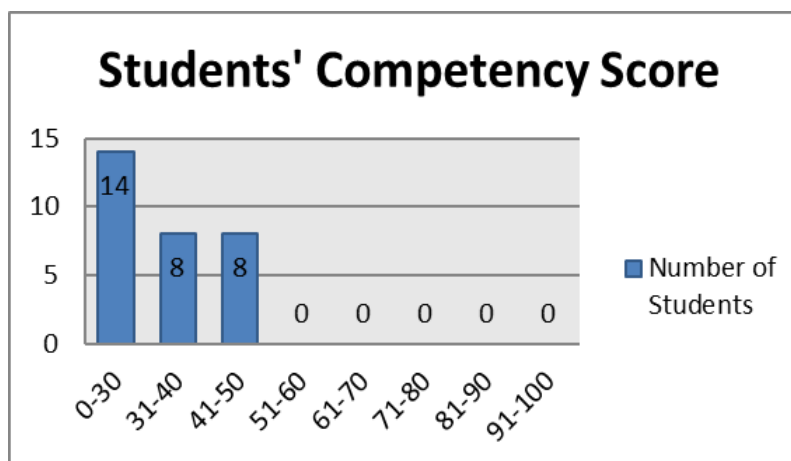

Figure 1 Summary of Students' Competency Score to CEFR

By categorizing and justifying the students' competency, the level of language acquisition can also be identified. The result is shown in table 3 as follow:

Table 3 Justification Results of Language Acquisition Stage and Students' English competency scores

SLA stage	Representing Level of proficiency	Number of Student(s)	
Silent or receptive stage (preproduction)	Minimal	14	- Called as the silent period - Focus mainly on comprehension in this stage (vs. production) - May respond non-verbally, use gestures/movements to show comprehension, respond to pictures/other visuals - May understand about 500 words - Display some "parroting" speech repetition practice - Has minimal comprehension - Does nor verbalize - Nods "yes" and "no" - Draws and points
	Pre-basic	8	
Early production	Basic	8	- Expand their receptive vocabulary - Begin to use 1-2 word phrases (some non-verbal responses as well) - May produce longer practiced/ routine expressions - Will have limited comprehension of fast-paced/ social conversation

Based on the results provided in table 3, it can be seen that out of 30 students, 22 students (73%) are in Preproduction stage (silent or receptive stage). Meanwhile, 8 other students (27%) are in the Early production stage.

The table showed that students who are in the preproduction stage of acquiring foreign languages usually focus more on achieving receptive comprehensive scores (listening and reading) than doing production activities (speaking and writing) even though the comprehensive scores are possessed tends to be low, has sufficient understanding of about 500 words, tends to imitate and repeat, and is less able to give verbal responses spontaneously and tends to use nods or shakes.

Last but not least, in order to clarify the stage or the level, the described characteristics in each representing stage are contrasted to the teacher's teaching diary. Referring to the teaching notes, the teacher said that most students in their class were actually quite active in following lessons and completing assignments but tended to be less structured in giving verbal responses and tended to mix the language used. The documentation of teachers' diaries also revealed that most of the students in the class he teaches have mastery of English at an average level. The students' ability in understanding the reading and also questions in English was good enough so that the scores obtained were quite good. However, if it is related to direct communication, especially verbally, the ability of students to respond still needs to be improved even though in general students who have higher comprehensive scores have better response abilities than students with lower comprehensive scores.

Students who are at the stage of early-production on the acquisition of foreign languages are usually willing to learn the use of vocabulary passively, began to use the phrase in communications made,

able to use phrases rather long well-worn but still difficult to respond directly on verbal communication in an environment that has never been seen before. The results of the document observation analysis showed that only 27% of the 30 students were in this early production stage. This shows that Muhammadiyah high school students still have many things to learn about to enrich their language.

Based on these results, it can be concluded that Muhammadiyah high school students have foreign language acquisition which is at relatively early stages, namely preproduction and early production where at this stage students tend to only master receptive skills compared to productive, using simple language but also have a tendency to do a simple exploration of the vocabulary used (starting to be able to combine complex vocabulary). Thus, in general it can be said that Muhammadiyah high school students have quite good English text literacy skills but still need to be improved as shown by the results of the comprehensive receptive English skills test where most students are still at the minimum level. This result is closely related to the stages of acquiring foreign languages where it is known that Muhammadiyah high school students are still in the preproduction and early production stages. Indirectly, these results indicate that students who are still in the early stages of language acquisition have limited abilities in using English.

Students' ability to understand the use of a language is inseparable from the acquisition of a foreign language that he has. The higher the level of acquisition of a foreign language a person has, the better his ability in understanding the use of that language. One of the factors that determine one's level of foreign language acquisition is age and how long he has learned the language. The theory of language acquisition states that the older a person gets, the more time he or she spends learning the language. Until then, the language acquisition he has will be getting better. In this study, the focus raised is the acquisition of high school students who are on average aged 16-18 years. Based on the comprehensive English test scores, it is obtained that most Muhammadiyah high school students are in preproduction resistance, while the rest are in the early production stage. This indicates that high school students are still in the early stages of language acquisition if viewed from the extent of comprehensive achievement they have. This result is quite significant with the results of previous studies which stated that students at the level of pre-college education are generally in the early stages of production in language acquisition which usually does not allocate enough time to learn and use English as an applicant, especially in the EFL context. In other words, the vocabulary and also the ability of understanding the language is still limited. Only few students may be motivated to learn a foreign language more comprehensively, particularly in the academic context.

In addition, when someone starts learning a foreign language will determine how far he is able to understand the language. In other words, the faster a person learns a language, the better the language acquisition will be. This raises the bias that young children will learn a new language faster. However, a study revealed that adults are able to understand how a word is implemented that later on may impact their achievement in learning the language (Du, 2010). High school students are in the adolescent age group who still need education and teaching as well as comprehensive assistance from various parties to support their success in achieving the desired language attainment. So that in this, their educational, teaching, material, interaction, and intelligence environment is able to support them to learn vocabulary, pronunciation, language structure, language skills that make them achieve language acquisition at a certain level.

This study actually does not investigate hot the students' achievement and language acquisition are correlated to each other. It only reveals in what stage are their acquisition according to their achievement as a high school student and vice versa. Previous study proved that the different contexts and situations in which foreign languages are acquired and implemented also contribute to determining how well one's level of English literacy (Rodriguez-Tamayo & Tenjo-Macias, 2019). It means that many aspects should be considered in order to define the correlation. For example, an elementary school student who lives in an integrated environment with a foreign language will have a foreign language acquisition

that is different from college students who only use English in formal communication in the academic sphere. If the level of English literacy attainment of these two people is measured using the same system or format, there may be significant discrepancies in the results that refer to the subjectivity of foreign language literacy investigations. This statement is in line with the results of previous research which states that there are significant differences between two groups of students with different inputs but analyzed with the same scoring system (Ababneh, 2015; İsmail, Y. & Seyfi, 2019; Stewart et al., 2012). This description indicates that one's English language skills cannot be generalized based on the results because there are several aspects that play an important role in helping students achieve certain English skills, including foreign language acquisition (Anil, 2015).

Conclusion

From the problems discussed in this study and based on the analysis carried out, the conclusion is that Muhammadiyah high school students already have literacy skills in understanding English texts which is shown by receptive English skills at the Minimal and Basic levels. For foreign language acquisition stage, high school students Muhammadiyah in general are in the preproduction stage and Early Production where their ability to apply the use of English is good enough in the areas of receptive and still need assistance to implement the use of English actively.

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