PROBING EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN INDONESIAN ISLAMIC HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE OF IAIN PEKALONGAN

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Abstract:

Language development programs in higher education institutions have been facing concurring obstacles. A great part of these obstacles are caused by low proficiency level of students. The fact that prospective students are considered to have adequate experience in learning foreign language does not necessarily make the programs design undemanding. In order to cope with this challenge, higher education institutions need to perform thorough and careful processes of designing language development programs. This article argues that determining realistic goals, keeping up with latest research findings, and creating supportive environments will greatly contribute to effectiveness of these programs.

Keywords: language development, strategic approaches, language instructors

Abstrak:

Program pengembangan bahasa di institusi pendidikan tinggi telah menghadapi rintangan yang bersamaan. Sebagian besar hambatan ini disebabkan oleh tingkat kemahiran mahasiswa yang rendah. Fakta bahwa calon mahasiswa dianggap memiliki pengalaman yang cukup dalam belajar bahasa asing tidak serta merta membuat rancangan programnya kurang. Untuk mengatasi tantangan ini, institusi pendidikan tinggi perlu melakukan proses perancangan program pengembangan bahasa yang teliti dan cermat. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa menentukan tujuan yang realistis, mengikuti temuan penelitian terbaru, dan menciptakan lingkungan yang mendukung akan sangat berkontribusi terhadap efektivitas program ini.

Kata Kunci: *pengembangan bahasa, pendekatan strategis, instruktur bahasa*

Introduction: Higher Education In Relation To Use Of International Language

Education is considered as a leading indicator of one country's development. It is widely accepted that the more the number of educated people the more developed the country. It seems fair to say that developed countries have the lowest number of illiterate people. Kyllonen puts it, "*For societies, educational attainment is a leading indicator of economic growth, and consequently political leaders around the world promote policies leading to greater educational attainment.*"[1] The logic could be understood easily this way: education makes people civilized, the more civilized the people of a country, the higher the welfare its citizens achieve. On the other hand, it is generally assumed that a high number of crimes and poverty is often parallel to a low number of educated people.

Higher education specifically plays an important role in a country's development.

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[1] Patrick C. Kyllonen, "The Importance of Higher Education and the Role of Noncognitive Attributes in College Success", *Pensamiento Educativo. Revista de Investigación Educacional Latinoamericana*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2012), 96.

Higher education in many ways helps to develop a country's strategies in its human resources and economic development. All aspects of development are related to and supported by researches conducted by higher education. O'Carrol et.al observes, "Universities perform vital functions both as generators of new knowledge through their leading-edge research activities and as trainers of highly qualified labour. As most research universities will attest, ... they contribute strongly to regional economic growth and development."[2] Researchers and scholars have their says consulted by state governmets. Modern management –even bureaucracy- cannot neglect researches conducted by this institution. In fact, governments of developed countries are working hand in hand with universities in lots of fields. On the contrary, lots of development programs carried out by governments run ineffectively and inefficiently due to lack of research data supporting the policies.

In cases where these policies are not directly linked to university researches, policies made by government must be based on data collected using research methodologies developed in these institutions. Infrastructure of a country for example needs expertise of civil engineering; health and well-being of all citizens need work of physicians, and schools needs qualified teachers trained by higher education. Hence development strategies of a country and university researches are inseparable. German Rektor's Conference concluded,

> "Universities, in their capacity as education facilities for training future decision-makers, and as centres of research bear particular responsibility here and play a decisive role. They lay the foundations by delivering knowledge, competences and values through teaching and learning, and by engaging in research generate the knowledge and innovations needed for shaping sustainable development.[3]

Education also determines one's job. It is hardly impossible to tell jobs that do not require any qualification. Latest improvement in diversification of courses at higher education indicated incorporation of a number of traditional expertise. Chinese medicine for instance is now available in some universities. The same cases also happen to herbal medicine, carpentry and agriculture expertise. "More education leads to greater earnings, lower unemployment, lower crime, greater civic participation, higher job status, and more job satisfaction".[4] In addition, professionals and business activities are

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[2] O'Carroll, C.; Harmon, Colm; Farrell, Lisa, *The Economic And Social Impact Of Higher Education*, (Dublin: Irish Universities Association, 2006), 8.

[3] German Commission for UNESCO on Higher Education for Sustainable Development, *Universities For Sustainable Development*, (Bonn: Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, 2010), 4.

[4] Patrick C. Kyllonen, "The Importance of Higher Education, 96.

greatly influenced by the existence of higher education. "*In most parts of the world, higher education institutions are also expected to act as channels of social mobility, as universities support the establishment of national professions and industries*".[5]

Through higher education nations' destiny is very much determined. Human resource of a nation is shaped by the culture built in higher education. "They are not just tertiary schools, but also cradles of nations, professions and values".[6] Students of HE are demanded to practice autonomy learning habits. A sharp distinguishing factor of learning style attributed to HE students – compared to other lower level schooling- is independent learning. An independent learning offers HE students full freedom to organize methods, approaches and priorities to achieving their goals. Careful and well-organized students find this learning model favourable and constructive, while unfortunate ones might be carried away due to poor organization.

The map of global education offers higher education students a vast range of institutions to choose from. The aforementioned style of learning, where students themselves are main determiner of their success, could be of much benefit for the

ones who are creative, hardworking and visionary. The fact that a large number of universities across the world could be accessed by scholarship, these students -upon desiring the learning- will do their best to master the required language, mainly English. As a result, they might take a number of courses or learn the language by themselves.

This attitude of independent learner matches the global setting of open competition for almost absolutely all kinds of achievements. For this reason, students of higher education are expected to nurture sets of competencies and attitudes that make them skilful individuals in this large-scale arena. Higher education has to take this responsibility providing any necessary means and strategies.

Predicaments Faced By Islamic Higher Education Institution

1. Academic Issues

Islamic higher education is fundamentally dealing with two streams of different learning approaches. On one hand, it is a religious kind of learning where intangible aspects construct its main structure. On the other hand, like other higher education institutions, it cannot ignore the scientific model of studies. The two faces, though many view them are not necessarily contradictory, pose islamic higher education with a dilemma.

At one level, religious studies involve issues related to things on which it is hard to

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[5] Seppo Hölttä, Elias Pekkola, Annica Moore, *Partnering for Development and Change*, (Tampere: Centre for International Mobility CIMO & University of Tampere, 2015), 9.

[6] *Ibid.*

conduct scientific investigation. Faith, worship, prayers, revelation are just to mentions few of areas dealt in religious studies. Researches on these issues are often considered to have never come to satisfactory findings. Firm results seem unattainable to produce by researches in these areas. However, on the other side of the coin, Islamic higher education cannot neglect such issues. Community members of higher education and a broader society expect Islamic higher education to provide solutions for problems faced by Muslim community.

A religious learning in Islamic higher education necessitates a certain level of mastery of supporting competencies. Having Arabic culture as its background, Islamic studies demand a certain level of mastery in Arabic literature. In cases where these universities are located in Muslim majority country, meaning lots of its people's daily religious activities use Arabic language, a mastery of Arabic literature might face fewer obstacles than those located in non Muslim majority. Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions for instance have their majority of students is Muslims. The fact that these Muslims students to some extent have practiced their religious activities using Arabic language makes Islamic studies more familiar to them.

At another level, the dilemma faced by Islamic higher education is related to a demand to stand firm on two grounds, making

it characterized by religious preaching mission and scientific learning culture. Islamic higher education is by its design a continuation of Islamic schools. These schools are places for Muslim families to send their children learning how to practice their religion. Strategies and approaches employed in these schools to a certain level are parallel to what mosques or churches offer to their members. The goal is to help students become good Muslims.

This kind of learning to a large extent effects how Islamic studies in Islamic higher education conducted. Scientific approaches become less attractive to both the students and the lecturers. This happens not because they are incompatible with subjects of Islamic studies. They are less appealing due to religious barriers that restrict community members of Islamic higher education – students and lecturers- to scrutinize religious issues using this model of study. A discussion of Muslim's holy book for instance cannot violate some of its attributes as divine revelation. The book is viewed as flawless and any disagreement that might come from any other sources of knowledge must be regarded as second to the truth that the book comes with. However, the barriers cannot be applied to non-Muslim researchers. Some of Islamic studies conducted in western universities have received strong reactions from Muslims around the world. This could be explained that Islamic studies performed in

these institutions employ scientific approaches where divine matters are treated the same as worldly issues. Sensitive issues often become objects of researches conducted by Western academics.

Another challenge faced by Islamic universities is an orientation that puts more emphasis on quantity than quality. The orientation has been degrading the quality of Islamic higher education institutions, especially the ones that are state-owned. One reason is that the higher the number of the students the higher the number of financial assistance these institutions collect. This orientation focuses more on physical or infrastructure development than students' academic achievements. The big amount of financial assistance from central government is more easily allocated to physical projects.

This orientation which leads to let physical development take precedence over academic achievements render both students and lecturers' academic competence underachieved. In terms of students, big classes become unavoidable. It is very hard for a student to have his assignments fully attended by his lecturer. Both individual and collective work done by students rarely receives required attention from their lecturers. Consequently, students have a propensity to underestimate their academic duties. Finally assignments are done in a mediocre way.

The phenomenon occurs side by side with issues faced by lecturers. Big classes make their duties overloaded. One lecturer needs to handle on average more than four hundred students each semester. A question of how he could manage himself to read, correct, and evaluate his students' assignments turns into an everyday song that nobody listens. This in turn impedes lecturers' duties to conduct researches. Let alone to conduct researches, to offer full attention to students' work seems unworkable. This ensures that academic achievements gain no significance in this quantity orientation.

One point needs to receive full attention regarding this matter. Lack of academic supervision results in low standard of students' academic work. Higher education differs from high schools in terms of approaches used in teaching and learning activities. Writing an academic paper and being an active participant in an academic discussion seem to be unavoidable attributes that need to be held by students of higher education. The fact that command in writing a good essay or paper is hard to be mastered by high school graduates, higher education institutions need to develop a strategy in assisting their students in an incremental way.

A failure in the development of the strategy could lead to production of university graduates lacking fundamental academic values. One common phenomenon is student's tendency to make a short version of

a book or two –instead of an essay- in fufilling their assignment to write an essay or a paper. *Copy and paste* becomes a normal attitude done by students and approved by their lecturers. To find a single paragraph in a paper –which is fully written by students, not a *copy-paste*- might become a hard thing to do. This kind of attitude obviously puts students in a dangerous comfort zone. To write a paragraph is becoming harder and harder as their lecturers keep letting them build this behaviour.

The worst thing happens is when they are required to make a final project or write a thesis. The behaviour they have built since their first encounter with paper writing cannot help them in any way in fulfilling study requirement. Students are incapable of writing a meaningful paragraph, let alone an argumentation of a study. Much of what they write in fact is a combination of sentences and paragraphs written by books or papers authors. Indeed, plagiarism appears to be a serious issue here.

Plagiarism turns to be a serious issue in all higher education institutions. All freshmen are made aware by their institutions of the issue and advised to respond correspondingly. HE institutions develop careful strategies to ensure their students safe from this behaviour. However, within an institution that still focuses on physical achievement rather than academic, plagiarism poses to be serious threat for all members of institutions. The

problem needs to be considerably given attention as the institution is required to develop a systematic approach ensuring fulfilment of students' need of academic supervision.

2. Political Issues

Political issues have brought about alarming condition of Islamic higher education in Indonesia. While it is considered taboo to discuss the matter openly, almost everyone involved in these institutions realize that there is an incessant conflict occurring between traditional Muslim group and modern Muslim group. This conflict has colored practically all political arenas emerging in the institutions, and this also has made academic development and improvement hampered.

The present condition of State Islamic school of higher learning (consisting of state Islamic universities –UIN-, state institutes for Islamic studies –IAIN-, and state college for Islamic studies -STAIN) in Indonesia cannot be separated from the ongoing interaction between Islam and the state since the beginning of the country's embryonic independence. The Islamic group's persistence in making Islam the basic philosophy of the state prior and after independence might serve as the background for the situation. As the group's struggle to build a theocratic state failed, it took ongoing exertion to secure certain political power in

the government. This led the group to control the Ministry of Religious Affairs whose resources to manage educational practices are believed not as strong as the Ministry of National Education. It has been said that one of the reasons state Islamic higher institutions are generally considered left behind compared to state public universities is the fact that the two are managed by different portfolios. The Ministry of National Education is responsible for the development of the latter, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs for the former.

Prior to the country's independence, there was an intense debate on the state ideology. Two groups -National and Islamic- fought for their stances to shape the country. While National group urged that the country had to have a non-religious form of the state, the Islamic proposed Indonesia to be an Islamic country. It was in the Investigating Committee for the Preparation of Indonesian Independence, established on March 1st 1945, that the debates about the relationship between Islam and the state became exceptionally intense.[7]

The latter group believed that Islam should be the basis for Indonesian Nationalism. Indonesian nationalism would not exist without Islam since it had released Indonesian people throughout the archipelago from 'attitude of isolation'. It was Islam that generated the spirit of Indonesian unity.[8] On the other hand, the former group who was concerned about non-Muslim Indonesians, proposed *Pancasila* (five guiding principles) as the state ideology. It argued that if Islam became the state ideology, other Indonesians who were not Muslim would feel excluded. Alternatively, *Pancasila*, whose one of its principles is 'belief in God', would make Indonesia align with spirit of Islam and at the same time protect other religions practised by non-Muslim Indonesian people.[9]

This chaotic political situation to some extent had posed significant impact on the existence of Islamic education, including its school of higher learning. The State Islamic College established in 1951 started to be regarded as political asset by Muslim leaders and made them build up the internal power of Islamic community through education and operation of the Ministry of Religion. Regrettably, securing portfolios had then become a battle between Modernist and Traditionalist Muslims.

Strategic Approaches To Effective Language Development Program In Indonesian Islamic Higher Education

1. Determining realistic goals

A number of problems faced by Indonesian Islamic higher education

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[7] Ramage, D. E., *Politics in Indonesia: Democracy, Islam and The Ideology of Tolerance.*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 46.

[8] Effendi, B., *Islam and The State in Indonesia*, (Pasir Panjang: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 27.

[9] Ramage, D. E., *Politics in Indonesia,* 46.

discussed above somehow have made language development programs unrealistic. Issues such as big classes that demand equal treatment, different disciplines that require particular development programs and -in case of Arabic language competence- extremely mixed ability of freshmen that needs appropriate handling, all lead to complexity in determining accurate language development goals.

A typical error in establishing objectives is a failure in identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats held by an institution. At a practical level, an institution tends to establish over-demanding targets, goals and objectives. At the end, students often become the worst victim of this carelessness.

Big classes necessitate such things as highly skilled instructors, high-tech equipment that can simplify instructors' tasks and adequate number of classrooms for effective language classes. Good teachers guide their students according to their level of understanding. Brighter students need only light guidance from their teachers, while low-achieving ones might need extra supervision. Best teachers are those who treat their students' development individually, as each student needs different assistance. Therefore, big classes pose teachers with bigger challenges in terms of teaching strategies, methods of evaluation and models of assistance offered to their students.

Big classes do not seem to be a problem provided the teachers prove to be highly skilled instructors. These are people who are personally, pedagogically, and socially intelligent so that they able to face any circumstances when teaching classes. Knowledge and experience in classroom management and curriculum development serve as biggest contributing factors to learning effectiveness. Latest researches offer wide range of strategies in teaching big classes, and teachers who are keeping themselves up with these findings and putting those into practice will hardly find serious difficulties in teaching a big number of students. In contrast, big classes become a huge obstacle for learning effectiveness when the teachers are only of average competence.

Different disciplines require particular development programs. Different types of studies require different kinds of language skills. Another issue related to language development programs is the kinds of language skill to be developed for students of different disciplines. The latest trend in language teaching is opposed by this viewpoint. Researches on language teaching observe that the four language skills must not be taught separately. The skills need to be learned by the students simultaneously; they are inseparable. Simply put, it is unworkable for a student to master a speaking skill without mastering a listening skill, and it is impossible to gain proficiency in writing skill

without becoming proficient in reading skill. However, the reality shows that students who are projected to resume work in public service for instance are considered to need speaking skill more than any other skills. Likewise, Islamic law students are said to require reading skill better than any other skills.

Mixed-ability of freshmen poses language programs with problems in curriculum design. Every effective learning process is preceded by an analysis of prospective students' behaviour. The data collected from this analysis is used to develop materials and teaching strategies. In past time, almost one hundred per cent of enrolment came from Islamic school; making Islamic universities manage groups of students from similar background. Islamic higher education nowadays accepts new students of wide range of differences in educational background. It is fair to say that freshmen of Islamic higher learning today might know only very little about Islamic science. Considering Arabic language as the basic language of Islamic science, freshmen with little knowledge of the science have a very minimum level of Arabic language. This vast diversity in Islamic science background of freshmen leads to complexity in designing curriculum, especially when this language program is compulsory for new students.

Strategic approaches. Goal setting is an inherent part of management processes. To develop workable goals an organization needs

to perform strategic planning. A popular means to do this is SWOT analysis.[10] Through this analysis an organization could have comprehensive view of both its internal and external environments. The effectiveness of this analysis relies on a number of criteria, namely validity, depth and breadth. Validity refers to level of sensibility of reasoning on which these data are collected, depth demonstrates how detailed the collected data are, and breadth shows level of inclusiveness these data could offer to management. Successful analysis leads to well-developed strategies and vice versa.

The problem with implementation of successful multilingual policy stems from the absence of multiple, variable, deeply processed scientific data on community profiles, within the university as well as in the region and globally. Political will and emotional energy alone cannot provide the know-how to put economically advantageous language policies into practice. The questions we should be asking are thus: What kinds of needs analysis should been done on the 'communities of practice' which represent our staff and our students? How can all of the participants with, in all cases, multiple linguistic identities, be affirmed within

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[10] Paul Yelder, *Effective Strategic Planning*, (Maryland: The Enterprise Foundation, 1999), 27.

the institution to ensure long-term benefits?.[11]

Therefore, language development programs need to be carefully designed with high level of clarity. Such issues as big classes, mixed-ability students in one class and different disciplines requiring different treatments show how language programs require cautious designing taking into consideration all affecting factors.

2. Keeping up with latest development in language learning

Researches on language learning and teaching have to be regularly accessed and disseminated amongst language instructors. Change is the reality of life. What is considered good or appropriate now might not be the case in future time. Language instructors need to keep themselves up to date with latest research findings. A common thing happening to teachers is confusion about ineffectiveness of once effective teaching strategies they have been using. Many teachers view that their successful teaching strategies will last forever. The truth is students of last year are different from students of this year. Hence successful strategies used a year ago might end up unproductive now.

Strategic approaches. Innovations to shape sustainable development become inevitable element of higher education institutions. UNESCO observes,

> Universities, in their capacity as education facilities for training future decision-makers, and as centres of research bear particular responsibility here and play a decisive role. They lay the foundations by delivering knowledge, competences and values through teaching and learning, and by engaging in research generate the knowledge and innovations needed for shaping sustainable development.[12] (4)

Therefore, to keep up with latest development in language learning, instructors should be provided an access to Journals on language teaching and learning. These journals could serve as a window to latest development. Today academics cannot neglect significant roles played by academic journals. Latest developments achieved by practitioners around the world are documented in academic journals. In addition, instructors need to be empowered on a regular basis as to equip them with the ever-changing challenges of ELT. Also, visitation to best language institutions to learn from their best practices and inviting best practitioners in language learning and teaching to share their

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[11] Liesel Hibbert, "Language Development in Higher Education: Suggested Paradigms and Their Applications in South Africa", *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2011), 39.

[12] German Commission for UNESCO on Higher Education for Sustainable Development, *Universities For Sustainable Development*, 4

ideas amongst instructors could assist instructors to keep themselves updated.

3. Creating supportive environments

Bi-ah Lughowiyyah is the answer. As cited by Young and Astarita[13] (2013), " Ortega argued that second language acquisition is stronger and better after the social turn." The institution needs to create specific days and areas where students and everyone involved in the university to use the target language. A number of Western Higher Education institutions for instance have made an integration of communication skills as learning outcomes within disciplinary teaching as one of strategies to develop international students' academic achievements.[14] "Language proficiency is positively correlated to academic achievement. so concentrating on the language proficiency for language development of the students paves the way for their academic success too."[15]

Supportive environments in foreign language acquisition can be done in different ways, namely language agents, daily announcements, new language broadcast, and language spaces. Language agents are people who use foreign languages either Arabic or English to converse anywhere inside the institutions. These agents are people who are selected by language development unit. They can be students or lecturers. The goal of these agents is to build environment facilitating foreign language uses, motivating others to participate in using foreign languages.

Daily announcements and new language broadcast are the use of means of information transmission to community members of the institution where foreign languages are used. A former model covers all kinds of announcements, while the latter focuses on new expressions and vocabulary deemed important to be learned by community members of university or higher education institutions. Finally, language spaces are areas specified for uses of foreign languages. Anyone entering these spaces is obliged to use foreign languages, in this case either Arabic or English. These spaces can also be specified in terms of time. The use of Arabic language in specific areas is performed in Mondays and Wednesdays, while English language in Tuesdays and Thursdays. Through supportive environments higher education institutions can improve the use of foreign languages by their community members.

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[13] Richard F. Young, Alice C. Astarita, "Practice Theory in Language Learning", *LANGUAGE LEARNING, a Journal of Research in Language Studies,* Vol.63, No.1 (2013),171.

[14] Sophie Arkoudis, Chi Baik, Emmaline Bexley, and Lachlan Doughney, *English Language Proficiency and Employability Framework For Australian Higher Education Institutions,* (Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education The University of Melbourne, 2014), 5.

[15] H. Jeraltin Vency & E. Ramganesh, "Is Language Proficiency Taken Care of at Higher Education Level? Need for Self Efficacy of Post Graduate Students", *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol. 4, No. 6 (2013), 1181.

Conclusion

The role of higher education in a nation development proves to be undeniable. Globalization necessitates higher education institutions to take a greater responsibility in creating ways for citizens to make the most of global advancements. Responding to this demand, higher education institutions need to put in action applicable strategies in building command of foreign languages of their graduates.

Analysing all predicaments and possibilities, Islamic higher education –in this case, IAIN Pekalongan- could make serious attempts to put into practice the following strategies, namely (1) determining realistic goals considering all aspects of internal and external environments, (2) keeping up with the latest development in language learning so as to respond to never ceasing challenges posed by new students, and finally (3) creating supportive environments where classroom activities could be strengthened by extra programs making the process of objectives achievements more effective.

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