STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF RESEARCH IN DEVELOPING THEIR COMPETENCE AS ENGLISH TEACHER CANDIDATES

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore the fourth year students’ perceptions of Research in English Department of Pasundan School of Teacher Training and Education. Research has been integrated into the curriculum of English department as Introduction to Research (2 SKS) and Research Project (3 SKS). Introduction to Research gives basic understanding of what research is, why research is important and how to conduct research in English education. On the other hand Research Project gives opportunity for students to apply their knowledge in conducting research. The primary method for this research is a case study, involving the fourth year students as the participants. Students’ questionnaires and focus group interview were used as instruments for collecting the data. The results of the study indicated that the students perceived research as important in developing their competence to conduct research, to be more creative in using various English teaching methods, and to enable them to apply research result into their teaching practices. However, they still have many difficulties, such as formulating research problems, determining kinds of research design, and calculating statistical data. Thus, scaffolding from supervisors is primarily needed to improve their research skills.

Key Words: students’ perception, research, competence

Introduction

Philosophically, academician in higher education notice and acknowledge the established links between research and teaching. In Indonesian context, the links between the two has widely known as Tri Dharma of Higher Education, which includes teaching and education, research and public services. All universities follow this philosophical view as the bases of their work and educational system. Figure 1 will best show the links of teaching, researching and serving public as the three main aspects of Tri Dharma.

It is assumed that good teaching resulted from good research. In other words research benefits the teaching, which also means that there is a need for a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between teaching and research. Johnes (2006) in his study
stated that there should be an investigated teaching-research links in Teaching-led Higher education where students’ experience it.

A few studies which focus on student perceptions of research (e.g. Johnes, 2006; Brodie & Brodie, 2005) revealed that students perceive both positive and negative effects from a research-active staff, but that any benefits can only be fully realised if staff research is integrated with the student experience. Research and teaching are symbiotic since both are about interpreting, constructing and engaging with knowledge.

**Figure 1 the links of teaching, researching and public services**

There is a tendency that research is seen primarily as a source for assignments and students’ perception of research is very much led by the context of their assignments. In other words, students will not conduct any researches unless it is a mandatory assignment to complete their study. This paper tries to examine the students’ perceptions of research in developing their competence as English teacher candidates. Its aims is to give a brief
description of how the undergraduate students perceive genuinely what research is, why research is important and how the students conduct their own research projects.

Context of Study

School of Teachers Training and Education (STKIP) Pasundan Cimahi is one institution which produces teacher candidates. There are three departments in this school: sport education, citizenship education and English education. The statuta of this school has delineated the importance of research which will give educational experience for undergraduate students in conducting their own research projects. This has also resulted in an institutional focus on, and commitment to, give undergraduate research opportunities. In its academic interaction, the lecturers promote the way of how to raise the awareness of student involvement in research and to promote the importance of research-based learning.

This study was conducted in English education department in which research is being introduced and taught in two subjects: Introduction to Research (2 credit hours) in the sixth semester and Research Project (3 credit hours) in the seventh semester. In Introduction to Research, the students are directed to develop their perceptions and views on trends and issues in teaching English. Thus they can comprehend basic concepts of research, examine the phenomena of language, and writing their own research proposal. The students are expected to develop their skills in searching for research references. The Research Project provides opportunity for students to conduct their original research on a subject that interests them. The project represents a more detailed investigation into a topic that grows out of the students’ involvement in their research field. The research is expected to be innovative endeavor using primary sources in teaching English. In addition, the project may focus on the English language teaching, literature or language skills.

Research Methodology

The participants of the study were the fourth year of English education department (the researcher present institution). All the students were required to undertake primary research in the final year. Twenty of the fourth year students were selected to fill in the students’ questionnaire, then out of five students were further selected to follow focus group interview. A focus group interview is the process of collecting data through interviews with a
group of people, typically four to six (Creswell, 2008). It enabled the researcher to collect data from a lot of people very quickly, and individuals could spark off ideas in each other. The aim of the study was to answer the following research question:

**What are the fourth year students’ perceptions of the importance of research and its contribution in developing their competence as English teacher candidates?**

**Kind of Method**

This study used a qualitative case study in which the researcher seeks to construct description of total phenomena within the context (Maxwell, 1996; Cohen and Manion, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1990); using purposively one research site (Nunan, 1992) combined with three data collection techniques: students’ questionnaire, students’ interview and documents (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1988; Silverman, 2005). Syllabus of Introduction to Research and Research Project were used as documents (Merriam, 1988).

In this study, the researcher applied inductive analytical approach by searching for emerging patterns within the fourth year students’ perceptions of Research. Data analysis were conducted by several steps a) focusing based on theoretical framework and emerging themes; b) organizing the data; c) coding the data by themes.

**Results and Discussion**

This section reports the findings from data analysis to answer the research question. Data from students questionnaire and focus group interview showed the following findings. Below is the descriptions of the findings from students’ questionnaires and focus group interview.

**Students’ Perceptions of Research**

Perception is one of the key words in this research. One of the commonest definition of perception is the interpretation of information provided by sensory systems
(Darley et al., 1984). Ordinarily this process of interpretation is so automatic, rapid and successful that we are not even aware of it. In addition, Garner (1969) delineates that to perceive is to know. Perceiving is a cognitive process involving knowing, understanding, comprehending, organizing, even cognizing. To perceive is an active process in which the person actively perceives his environment. Perception is a part of the relationship between a person and the environment, and as such, it is determined by both the needs and activities of the individual and by the information that is actually available. In a brief, student perceptions in the context of study is operationally defined as students’ comprehensions and understandings of the importance of research and its contribution in developing their competence as English teacher candidates.

Data from students’ questionnaire showed that all students (100%) agreed with the statement that research subject is important for their English education with the reason that research helped them prepare their research project and write their research reports.

In focus group interview, there are various comments and a degree apprehension from the students, when they were asked their opinion on the importance of research.

Research diajarkan untuk meneliti, dan merupakan suatu kegiatan yang kita kembangkan untuk menghadapi tugas akhir (R#1, R#2, R#4, Focus group interview, June, 2012).

The opinion stated above was in line with Creswell (2008) who states that research is important, because it can improve practice. Another opinion was very interesting to discuss when one participant stated an analogy of research as follow:

*Riset diajarkan agar kita dapat membuat skripsi, ibaratnya research itu seperti peta (map) atau pedoman-pedoman dalam melaksanakan riset (R#5).*

This opinion showed the student comprehension of research as a guideline in conducting their own research. In addition, Trochim (2001) states his visualization of research which endeavor sequentially, like taking a trip, like moving down a road-the road to research. Research involves an eclectic blending of enormous range of skills and activity.
One participant declared that research is not only important to fulfil the requirement to obtain Sarjana degree, but also needed in all fields of study; and it can be used to evaluate the real answer to research question. Here is his opinion:

Riset itu bukan sekedar memenuhi syarat untuk kelulusan, tapi research bisa dikerjakan dalam semua bidang seperti misalnya: dalam pemerintah, ekonomi atau pemerintahan. Riset juga dibutuhkan untuk mengevaluasi atau mendapatkan cara yang sesuai untuk solusi terhadap masalah tersebut (R#3, focus group interview, June 2012).

It is acknowledged that not all educators have an understanding and appreciation of research. To some, probably, research may seem like something that is important only for faculty members in the ivory tower of colleges or universities. On the other hand, to some, probably, research is the most attracted systematic activity which contribute to the development of teaching and education. Creswell (2008) states that there are three important reasons why research is important: 1) Research adds to our knowledge; 2) Research improve practice; and 3) Research informs policy debates.

In addition, Trochim (2001) states his visualization of research which endeavor sequentially, like taking a trip, like moving down a road—the road to research. Research involves an eclectic blending of enormous range of skills and activity.

All students agreed with the idea that research was important in their education, though one student still emphasized on the importance of research for the sake of completing his study.

**Students’ definitions of research**

The students’ perceptions can also be noticed from their definition of research. How they comprehend and understand research can be seen in its implementation on their own research project. Data from students questionnaire revealed that their definitions of research covered several aspects as follows:

Research is a systematic investigation, the way, activity or study to answer research question by doing the experiment to get data and give solution to research problem (Students’ questionnaire).

Penelitian adalah investigasi sistematik, cara, kegiatan atau studi untuk menjawab pertanyaan penelitian dengan melakukan eksperimen untuk memperoleh data dan memberi solusi bagi masalah penelitian.
In addition, data from focus group interview delineated further detail on how the students defined research.

An activity done by somebody to find out an answer to the research problem.

Salah satu kegiatan yang dilakukan seseorang untuk menemukan jawaban untuk permasalahan dalam penelitian tersebut (R#1).

Research is learning activity which is, I mean e...activity or a way to face final test using method to write research report.

Riset adalah kegiatan belajar yang, maksudnya e..., kegiatan yang kita lakukan atau suatu cara menghadapi final test dengan metode membuat laporan akhir hasil penelitian (R#2).

Research is a way to find our the strength and weaknesses from the problem, a way to analyze research problem which can be solved by using certain method.

Suatu penelitian dimana kita mencari sebuah kekurangan atau kelebihan dari masalah yang kita hadapi, merupakan cara menganalisa sebuah masalah yang dapat diperbaiki dengan metode-metode tertentu (R#4).

Research is an activity to find out something new or new method or new thinking or to replace old method to find out the newness of teaching methods.

Riset suatu kegiatan untuk mencari sesuatu yang baru atau metode atau pemikiran yang baru juga atau mengobrak-abrik metode yang lama untuk menemukan sesuatu yang baru dalam metode-metode mengajar baru (R#5) (focus group interview, June 2012).

The definitions put forward by the students were quite interesting to notice particularly when they stated that research is an activity to find answer to the research problem. In this case, they understand that research is purposively conducted to find solution to research problem. The students’ opinions are in line with the theory of research. Synthesizing some opinions from experts, there is a formulation of research definition in which at general level and philosophical thinking consists of three main elements or components: Pose a question (Creswell, 2008); a question, problem or hypothesis (Nunan, 1992); investigate a problem or question (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001); research question (Maxwell, 1996; Trochim, 2001); research problem (Merriam, 1988);

Therefore, research can be defined as as a process of steps used, a systematic process (Nunan, 1992, McMillan & Schumacher, 2001), to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue (Creswell, 2008).

**Contribution of Research in Developing the Students’ Competence as English Teacher Candidates**

Another important part in this research is how the students perceived the contribution of research in developing their competence as English teacher candidates particularly when they experienced Teaching Practices Program (PPL) at junior and secondary level of schools.

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Data from questionnaire showed that research helped them in certain areas of their competences, such as:

Research helped them in knowing their own competencies; in developing their competences in research fields; and in developing their competences to be more creative and innovative in using EFL methods in teaching English (Students’ questionnaire).

Penelitian membantu mereka dalam memahami kompetensi mereka; dalam mengembangkan kompetensi dalam penelitian; dalam mengembangkan kompetensi untuk lebih kreatif dan inovatif dalam menggunakan metode pengajaran bahasa Inggris.

Referring to government’s policy on developing teachers’ professionalism (2008), there are four competencies that should be possessed by teachers, which include: pedagogical competence, personality competence, professionalism competence and social competence. In line with these competencies, it is agreed by the students that research links to their pedagogical and professionalism competencies, where they can be more sensitive in understanding the students’ need and more capable in mastering their own field of study, and in analyzing critical content knowledge in their English study as their major. Thus, the need of improving teacher professionalism qualification is a must for students, while they are still pursuing their study at university level.

In addition, some students stated their opinions on this issue in the following findings:

*Riset bermanfaat dalam PPL, ketika memberikan latihan soal ke siswa, bisa digunakan untuk skripsi (R#1).*

*Menentukan metode yang benar untuk siswa, dalam mengajar dengan menggunakan metode yang menarik (R#2).*

*Di MK Research kita diperkenalkan pada beberapa contoh judul, e..ternyata judul itu bisa diterapkan di sekolah. Nah..waktu PPL, kita bisa mempraktekkan di kelas. Hub antara 2 variabel ketika dipraktekkan di kelas ternyata sangat terasa (R#3).*

*Mengimplementasikan metode di kelas, tidak semua judul bisa diterapkan (R#2).*

*Kuliah Intro to Research, memberikan beberapa judul dan coba diimplementasikan di kelas, pada akhirnya anak-anak bisa mengerti (R#1).*

Seeing from the English language study, Pettis (2002) states that principles, knowledge and skills are fundamentally integrated in the professionally competent teacher. If a teacher is to be professionally effective, he/she must ensure a balance in her/his expertise. The knowledgable and principled teacher who is also skillful is powerful educator. Specifically it is stated as follows: 1) If I am to be professionally competent educator, I must be principled and knowledgeable in addition to skillful; 2) My professional needs and interests have changed over time and continue to evolve; and 3) My commitment to professional development must be ongoing and personal (Pettis, 2002, p. 394).
Another theory from Taylor (2002) states several principles on how research in English language teaching can be conducted in the classroom. For example, from daily teaching practices, a teacher can think into a more theoretical level, in a way that he/she might find out the way to enhance classroom interaction to promote learning or what classroom research says about patterns of interaction and roles adopted by learners in small-group settings.

What we can see from the findings, it can be acknowledged that the fourth year students have the awareness of their roles as students-teacher who have hands on experience in their teaching practices and its links to the competence as students-researchers. They state that research help them develop their competence as English teacher candidates in teaching practices, made them creative and innovative in using teaching techniques in the classroom.

**Supervision of Research Paper**

Education is a field of inquiry where the phenomena, events, people, process and institutions constitute the raw materials for inquiries of many kinds. Education is an area of interdisciplinary research which provides descriptions, explanations, predictions, and evaluations od educational practices. While educational practices centers on instruction, such as curriculum development, innovations, administration, staff development, and policies. Research-based knowledge reflects this duality of education as a field of both inquiry and practice.

After taking the two subjects of research, the fourth year students were obliged to conduct their own research as the requirement for completing their study. Data from the students’ questionnaire revealed that the most important thing for them to carry on their own research project is to define their own research problem.

Define the research problems and background of research problem (students questionnaire).

*Menentukan masalah dan latar belakang penelitian.*

They got the formulation of the research problems mostly from their teaching context or workplace or from existing phenomena, in which they use it as main topic based on research background.
I got the topic for my research from my workplace; from the condition or subject; from the existing phenomena; and from my experience in teaching program (students' questionnaire).
Saya mendapat topik untuk penelitian dari tempat saya mengajar; dari kondisi subjek; dari fenomena yang ada; dan dari pengalaman praktek mengajar.

It is well known at the school level (STKIP) Pasundan Cimahi that research is a prerequisite for students before they graduate from the faculty. It is conducted as a final project, which determines the students to pass and obtain their bachelor degree. Referring to the manual book for research (2010), research report is written by undergraduate students from all departments in the faculty. The report should be written from their own research, with the aims at giving learning experience to undergraduate students in solving the research problem scientifically, analyzing data and drawing conclusions.

These findings dealt with the advantages of how the students got Introduction to Research and Research Project, and its contribution to their own research. Data from focus group interview revealed the following findings:

To test two variables by calculating the correlation between the two variables and I was glad when I got significant result.
Menguji dua variabel dengan cara menghitung korelasi di antara dua variabel tersebut dan senang jika mendapat hasil yang signifikan atas hasil tersebut (R#1).

This one requirement to pass, this can be seen from the purpose of learning.
Salah satu syarat untuk lulus, ini terlihat dari tujuan pembelajaran (R#2).

I prefer Research Project, because the difference between the two subjects seemed so clearly in conducting the research and calculating the data, and the kind of method whether experimental, quasi or descriptive studies. Previously, in Introduction to Research I could not see the difference, because this subject is just the introduction. It has not discussed data calculation yet. It just described kinds of method, but in Research Project we have conducted the project, such as mini research, proposed the title, and used the sample.
Saya lebih suka MK yang Research Project, karena perbedaannya terlihat sangat jelas dalam melakukan penelitian dan perhitungan datanya, eksperimental, quasi atau deskriptif. Tadinya dalam introduction to Research belum terlihat perbedaannya, baru perkenalan belum masuk ke perhitungan cara penelitiannya & pengenalan jenis-jenis penelitian, kalau di Research Project kita sudah melakukan penelitian, seperti mini research, membuat judul, menganalisis, menggunakan sampel (R#3).

The research process typically involves several phases, which are not always sequential nor are they an orderly step-by-step process, but rather an interactive process between the researcher and the logic of the problem, design and interpretation. The following summary is extracted from various sources (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Trochim, 2001; Creswell, 2008; Maxwell, 1996):
As a scientific product, research paper has certain contribution to the academic world at this school, as: (1) a learning process who direct the students in integrating their learning experiences in solving the research problem; (2) an opportunity for students to enhance the students’ competences in integrating their skills and learning experiences; (3) an opportunity for students to solve research problem in a scientific way.

Research paper should possess certain characteristics as follows:

1. Research should be directed to explore research problems in the field of educational research and instruction at primary to secondary schools level and even at higher education level.
2. Research problem is written as a result of field observation or literature review which is relevant to the field of study.
3. Mechanically the students should write their research paper in Indonesian language, except for students from English department, they have to write in English.
4. Research paper should be objective, in a sense, that the way how to delineate the report should avoid bias from personal opinion.
5. Research paper should be based on data analysis.
6. The conclusions should be drawn from scientific procedures by using appropriate research methodology.
7. It has 4-6 credit hours.

In line with the findings, we can clearly notice that the topics of research has been specified according to the departments. In this case students from English departments got the ideas for their working topics for their research derived from: 1) Theories on language and literature; 2)Teaching and instruction, including the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing; and 3)Teaching and instruction on language and arts (Manual book for writing research report, 2010).

Students’ expectation from the Supervisors

There are several steps for the students in conducting their own research. They have to propose their own title or working topic for their research, next undergo seminar on
research proposal, then revised the examined proposal and finally they got their own supervisors determined by the English department.

Usually the supervisors are the ones who are experts in their field of study and they are matched with the students’ topics in the proposal. The process of supervision can take longer time, depends on students’ persistency in pursuing and completing their research. There some expectation from students towards their own research supervisors:

I expect the supervisor give direction, help, correction, suggestion, guideline and scaffolding in the process of research and writing the research report (students’ questionnaire).
Saya berharap pembimbing dapat memberi arahan, bantuan, koreksi, saran, bimbingan dan bantuan dalam proses penelitian dan penulisan laporan penelitian.

According to the manual book for writing research report (2010), there are some steps taken to conduct supervision for undergraduate students who conduct research. The steps are as follows:

1. Preparation stage
In this stage the students should consult or discuss with lecturers who has specification in certain field of study with the purpose to determine the title of the paper, research problem and research methodology.

a. The students is obliged to write their own research proposal with the content structure cover: Title, background of research, research problems, the aims of the research, the benefits of the research, hypothesis, related literature, research methodology and research agenda.

b. Proposing the research proposal to have the admission from the head of English department. (This is conducted through research proposal seminar).

c. Admission of the research proposal and having the supervisors for their research.

2. Implementation stage
After the students get admission from the dean of STKIP Pasundan to have supervisors, the students can start the research consultation. The consultation is carried out within the research process under the supervisors and students agreement on the schedule of consultation time.

3. Final stage
The supervisors have authority to determine the students’ completeness of the paper and consider them worthy to have the oral defense of the paper.

Each stage in supervision process is important, which needs a cooperation between the students and the supervisors.

**Students’ Difficulties in Conducting their Research Project**

Data from students’ questionnaire revealed the students’ difficulties in designing their own research project.

Defining the title, subject, and chose research methodology correctly; more than that to find out subject of research.

Menentukan judul, dan metode penelitian yang tepat; selain daripada itu mencari subjek penelitian (Students’ questionnaire).

In addition data from focus interview showed several problems that the students stated as follows:

- To find out sorces or references; background of research, appropriate research method, theoretical foundation which is relevant to research results; to find out research materials and match the title with the statistical procedures.

Menemukan sumber atau referensi; latar belakang penelitian, menerapkan metode yang benar, dasar teori dengan hasil penelitian yang kita teliti, sulitnya mencari bahan & mencocokkan judul dan perhitungan statistiknya (R#1, 2, 3, 4 &5; focus group interview).

It is acknowledged that it is not easy to conduct research project. Data from focus group interview informed us that there some obstacles or difficulties when the students conduct their research project, particularly in the process of data collection to answer the question (Creswell, 2008; Maxwell, 1996); collecting and analyzing data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). In presenting an answer to the question (Creswell, 2008) based on data analysis and interpretation (Nunan, 1992), the students should be very careful in delineating the theoretical bases for the findings and draw conclusions about the problem (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

**Conclusion and Suggestion**
This research set out to explore how the fourth year students of English department perceive research in developing their competence as English teacher candidates. What emerged was a diverse set of views with a pragmatic thread among them. Students research is valued because it increases their creativity in implementing EFL methods in their teaching contexts, and acts as a culmination of their four years of study.

The students regard the links between research and teaching as generally positive, was the way that research helped them develop their competencies as English teacher candidates in the area of pedagogical and professionalism competence. Students did agree that the ideal research supervisor was someone who gave direction, help, correction, suggestion, guideline and scaffolding in the process of research and writing the research report.

The findings presented in this study constitute an insight into the fourth year students’ perception of the importance of research and its contribution in developing their competence as English teacher candidates. However, it can be taken into account as a preliminary study which gives empirical finding on how the students comprehend the importance of research. It is suggested that further research on this topic will be conducted to reveal some more aspects that can not be covered in this study.
REFERENCES


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