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Understanding Students' Perspective and Use of Technology for Language Learning at Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract

Pesantren or Islamic Boarding school is one of the oldest Islamic Institutions in Indonesia, home to the the largest muslim population in the world. There are two types of pesantren, traditional (salafi) and modern (khalaf). In selected modern pesantren, students are obliged to communicate in Arabic and/ or English language as a part of their bilingual program. The implementation of English in daily conversation requires students to acquire high level of English proficiency. The purpose of this study is to provide insight of ESL acquisition and practice, technology use to enhance language learning, and future enhancement of language learning through students' lenses. The writer distributed questionnaire and conducted focus group discussion to thirty Darul Ulum Islamic Boarding School students. The findings showed that while there are restrictions on the use of technology devices in pesantren, half of students feel that they have sufficient exposure to English through traditional teaching program. However, many students acknowledge that they have limited vocabulary that addresses to their daily lives, thus they would like to find more resources that accommodate this needs. Finally, based on the findings, this paper suggests that pesantren allows for more access to technology devices and diverse resources of ESL as well as availability of librarian or experts that can help students to use technology for learning efficiently.

Keywords: pesantren, ESL, bilingual program, student's perspective

Introduction

Undoubtedly, almost every child today is sufficiently adept with using technology—digital natives, many term. Almost every child becomes aware of technology devices.

They have never known a life without technology and technology devices now become integral part of their lives and they are using them for almost all purposes, including education.

Technology in learning has brought change to education paradigm (Linto, 2015). Education now comes in many forms such as online, blended, and collaborative learning. These changes leverage students' digital skills and prepare them to be a part of digital millennia. In English Language Learning (ELL) scheme, specifically, successful integration of technology will lead to collaborative, autonomous, and active student-centered learning cycle (Linto, 2015; Sung & Yeh, 2012). Students become active participants and researchers (Taylor and Gitsaki, 2003) with access to abundant and diverse resources and information. Research in computerassisted language learning (CALL) has suggested that computer technologies indeed facilitate processes beneficial to second language learning (Sung and Yeh, 2012). With the assistance of computer-based instruction, students are able to enhance their communication competence by folds (Zha, Kelly, Park, & Fitzgerald, 2006).

Islamic boarding schools or *pesantren* are the oldest and most known Islamic based education Institutions in Indonesia. In Tan (2014), it is stated that of 50.000 Islamic schools in the countries, over one third of them are *pesantrens*. There are two types of *pesantren*, traditional *pesantren* and modern *pesantren*.

Modern *pesantren* is a modernized form of *pesantren* where it applies formal learning system as practiced in school by introducing structured grade system, use of national curriculum, and combination of Islamic studies and general sciences.

As its effort to implement unique and innovative learning experience, *pesantren* (read: modern *pesantren*) starts to apply bilingual program format. This format introduces a learning system where foreign languages are used as media instruction for communications within the school and dormitories. The implementation of bilingual program, as Dewanti (2016) explained "is intended to improve the mastery of English skills and also improve Indonesian human resources in the future in order to compete in global job."

For the successful implementation of the bilingual program, *pesantren* should always reinvent itself with various efforts such as designing comprehensive syllabus, attractive and effective activities, and appropriate teaching method and evaluation. With many benefits that technology offers, it is expected that education in *pesantren* would also be able to successfully integrate it into their many programs, including bilingual program. Therefore, in doing it successfully, it is essential to know students' perception, as the prime and end users, on technology integration in *pesantren*. The author will focus on finding out students' perceptions and use of technology for language learning.

Research Methodologies

Context and Participants

The study was conducted at Darul Ulum Islamic Boarding School in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Darul Ulum is one of modern *pesantren*s that applies bilingual program and is commencing English as one of its main communication tools. The *pesantren* consists of *secondary school* program that includes junior and senior high school programs.

The sample of this study was selected using purposive sampling. The characteristics of sampling are:

(1) Students who have experienced living in boarding school for at least 3 years; (2) Students who have experienced using English as main communication tool in boarding school; and (3) Students who have learned using technology in classroom. From the characteristics set above, the participants chosen for this study were first-year and second-year high school students in Darul Ulum. A total of 35 students took part in the study.

Research Method

To collect the data, questionnaire and interview were facilitated. The author first distributed the questionnaire directly to students in two gender-segregated classes. The questionnaire consist of close-ended questions and one open-ended question. The purpose of the questionnaire is to find out students' understanding and use of technology in daily life and in academic setting as well as perceived ideal situation for in-class setting.

On August 9, the author interviewed 10 male and 10 female students in group discussion. The focus group discussion was conducted for about 120 minutes with author asking open-ended questions to each participant. The questions related to participants' experience in school, English language learning experience, technology integration, and familiarity with technology.

Findings

Perceived Technology Use

The questionnaire was used to collect the data on students' perception of technology use. Total of 35 students filled in the questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire intended to examine students' frequent use of technology in schools and daily life.

Setting	**Technology Device Usage**		
	Always (70 – 100 %)	Often (40 – 69 %)	Seldom (0 – 59%)
Home	94%	6%	0%
Dorm	0%	34%	66%

Class	0%	50%	50%

Home 94% 6% 0% Dorm 0% 34% 66% Class 0% 50% 50% As shown on the table above, students generally use technology devices when they are at home (94%) significantly higher in comparison to when they are at dorm and class. This is due to the fact that there is a policy that limits the use of gadget in dormitory. The regulation does not allow students to bring in their personal electronic devices (such as PC, laptop, and hand phone) to dormitories.

On being asked what electronic devices that the students own, all 35 students (100%) own cellphones with 90% of them owning smartphones. Meanwhile 27 students (77%) own laptop, 10 students (28%) own tablet, and 3 students (8%) own PC. In a section where students ranked the activities that they most often do using their device, 90% of students said communication as the most important function followed by entertainment (70%); learning (50%); and others (28%). Communication function relates to call, messaging, and social media apps where students are able to communicate with other person, entertainment relates to video, music, game focused apps, while learning function focuses on apps that aid students in working on their academic activities.

In one open-ended question, students were asked to provide names of applications/ functions they often use when using their electronic devices. All students answered calling and messaging functions. 34 students wrote social media apps such as: Facebook, Instagram, Path, WhatsApp, Line, and Twitter as applications they often use. Meanwhile 13 students (majority male students) wrote game apps, 15 wrote word processing tools, and 27 students cited music, radio, and video apps as the applications they often use.

A Day in Pesantren

Daily Life at *Pesantren*

In focus-group discussion, the author asked students to tell their day in *Pesantren* in general. Students collectively agree that the day in *pesantren* started by coming to mosque at dawn to perform Subuh prayer, morning lecture, and vocabulary lesson. After morning preparations, students go to *madrasah*. The madrasah is equivalent to secondary school. “We learn in school from 7.30 A.M until 3.00 P.M. After prayer, we’ll have extra courses, it can be Islamic studies’ courses, language courses, and school subjects. It’s different each week,” said a student. Their evening spent with Islamic focused subjects and lecturers. Students usually finished their days around 9.00 – 10.00 PM. One student added, “we usually have jam- packed schedule. Morning is school time and evening is boarding school time. We usually have other extra curricula activities on the weekend too.”

English Language Usage

Following question asked was about the practice of bilingual program in their *pesantren*. The summary of response is as follow:

"In *pesantren*, we have rule where we have to either use English language or Arabic as daily communication tool. Usually, one week will be dedicated to speaking Arabic and the following week to English. For example, if the rule is to speak English that day, we will spend the day communicating in English to our peers and *ustaz/ah* (instructor). If we are found to use Indonesian or other languages besides English and Arabic, we will get warning. If we happen to get our third warning, then we will be punished by the *Mahkamah* (council). The punishment is diverse depends on how severe students disobey the rule. It can be vocabulary memorization, extra class, or exhibitionism related punishment."

On account of using foreign language in their daily activities, students added, "we usually use any vocabularies we have memorized. When we couldn't remember any vocabularies, we combine languages (English – Arabic) to communicate with others." Another student added, "I feel that I just use whatever vocabulary I can find, in all honesty, I don't think I use proper English conversation and grammar when talking". Other students nodded in agreement citing that they often use "broken" English and incomplete sentences when speaking.

English Language Learning

Students stated that they learn English vocabulary every morning. "After prayer, we have to memorize selected vocabularies to our *ustaz/zah*. There will be extra time for morning teaching and evaluation for our vocabularies." Students usually learn the vocabulary given by their instructors. Meanwhile, the madrasah system at *pesantren* followed national curriculum standard. Students learn English as school subjects for specific designated time each week.

After school, students also attend extra classes. There are usually language classes once or twice a week. In these classes, students learn more about English grammar and language skills. "We have *ustaz/zah* taught us grammar and speaking. They usually prepare some English materials that are similar to what we learn in school", said one student. On the weekend, students are also able to choose extracurricular activities related to languages. There are options to join English speaking club or debate club as extracurricular activities.

All of the students agreed that their main resources of language learning are dictionary, English subject books, and subject experts (school teachers and ustaz/zah). "We always listen to vocabularies given by our *ustaz/ah* every morning. And we usually bring our dictionary to classes too," claimed one student. "If we have assignment at school that we don't understand, we usually bring it to afternoon class and ask our *ustaz/ah*". Another source of learning is school library. Students usually

spend their time at library to find the books and other resources for their homework and practice. "When I was assigned homework, I would come to library to look for resources." Another student followed, "We also learn from our seniors and peers. When we run out of words while talking to them, they usually help us out by reminding the words we forget." However, another student argued, saying "I am afraid to talk with seniors because we never know that senior is the one reporting us to language council."

Half the students responded positively when asked if they feel they have enough exposure of English language learning. Later in focus group, students revealed that they have quite a lot of time to learn English language in *pesantren*. However, surprisingly, many students also reported that they have limited vocabulary. Therefore, they would like to get more language resources that resonate to their needs in *pesantren*.

Technology Use for Language Learning

There are few instances where technology is used as one of the resources in language learning. The *pesantren* has language laboratory and library. The language laboratory, however, was no longer utilized. As one student claimed, "there was one time when we head to library for listening section. But that was a long time ago when I was a senior student in junior high." "I guess it's busted," another student claimed.

The library is equipped with computers that are connected to the internet. There are approximately eight computers found in the library. Students will use the computers to look for learning materials and resources. Some students claim that they would look up articles, audio, and translation application to help them coping with language learning. However, there is a limitation to how often they can use the computer. One female student explained "We can use computers when it is our class' turn. We will have to wait until the computer is available if we want to use it outside of our schedule."

When asked about other instances where students learn using technology, some female students mentioned that their English teacher at school sometimes use projector and laptop to teach English class. "Our teacher prepares a slide presentation for in-class learning. There are few instances when we listen to English audio or watch video."

The author further asked students about their experiences in using technology to learn English language. In questionnaire, the students were asked whether they have enough understanding in using technology to enhance their language learning, 17 students responded yes, 5 responded maybe and 13 said no. For those students who said maybe/ no revealed that lack of access and exposure to technology as the main reasons. "Since we cannot bring our personal smartphone and laptop, we can only rely on teachers, library, and school computers to find learning materials. When I

come back on the weekend, I would use my phone to learn," claimed one student. Other students also agreed that coming home and having access to their personal electronic devices are the only viable time they have interacting with technology by themselves.

When asked on how they would learn using their devices, students cite websites, social media, and games. "In Facebook, I would befriend foreigner and chat with him/ her. That's a good way for me to practice my English", said a female student. Male student further said, "I learn vocabulary by playing game. I usually play detective or sport game." The table below further showed students' usage of applications/ software to support their English language learning.

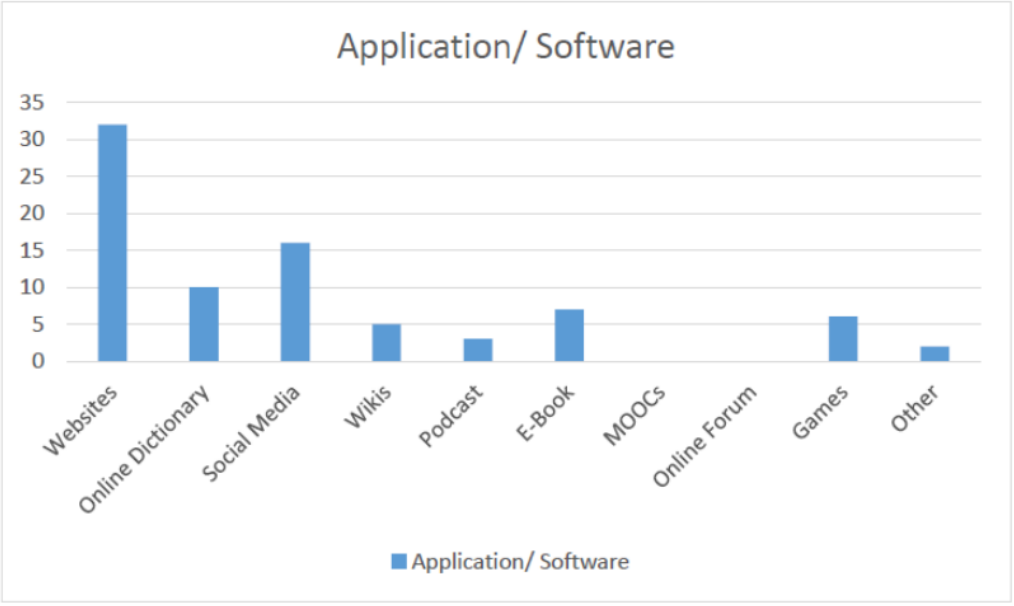

Image 1. Applications/ Software Use

Students' Perception of Using Technology in Classroom

In the questionnaire, students were asked about their perception in using technology to enhance their language learning. 32 students said yes, confirming their positive reception towards technology integration, meanwhile other 3 students said no. The reasons why they reject technology in classroom were distraction and taking time for in-class setting. For students who said yes, they believed that using technology will help enhancing their language skills (29); providing more language materials (31); motivating their learning process (26) and helping them to connect with more people/ subject experts (5).

Discussion

This study aims to provide insight to English language learning and the use of technology to enhance ELL in *pesantren*. The findings showed some interesting results regarding language efficacy; learning resources, and digital literacy.

In general, students in *pesantren* have adequate time to learn English. The bilingual program and extracurricular activities help exposing students to more frequent English language practice. Through bilingual program that requires students to communicate with English, students should be more likely to acquire high-English language proficiency. However, during focus group discussion, the author found that majority of students show low self-efficacy and confidence towards their English language acquisition. The primary reasons are due to students' limited understanding towards 'correct' English speaking skill and limited vocabulary.

Due to policy regarding the prohibition on the use of technology devices in *pesantren*, students are not able to utilize learning mediated devices to maximize their English language learning experience. This means that students have limitations to internet connection, online materials, and digitally enhanced learning product for language learning. Students mainly used printed materials such as books and dictionary as well as relied on their teachers to learn. Such practice turned students into passive learner who only follow along in teacher-dominated class. As Liton (2015) mentioned that "technology-regulated pedagogy affects the teachers' role from a dominator of knowledge to a facilitator. It replaces teacher-dominated lesson practices to learner-centric class activities." With successful technology integration, it is expected that students' role will change from passive followers to active participants.

Majority of students showed positive perception on the use of technology for language learning. The students identified technology as an effective educational tool that motivates them to learn new language and maximizes their language learning acquisition. Moreover, students also agreed that technology benefits them by providing more materials and connects them with more diverse people. Although the students are proficient in utilizing technology in their daily life, it is found that students have yet to maximize their understanding and proficiency in using available language learning mediated software and applications. From the many available choices of language learning applications, majority of students claimed to use website (31) and social media (17). Unfortunately, many students have yet familiarized themselves with other learning applications/ software.

Conclusion

Finally, based on the findings, this paper suggests that *pesantren* allows for more access to technology devices and diverse resources of ESL as well as availability of librarian or more expert person that will help students to use technology for learning efficiently.

Technology is a powerful media that is capable of guiding learner. Technology can offer much more than just a mere-entertainment tool. Several studies have indicated that with appropriate and scaffold use of digital technology, student's cognitive and social skill can be effectively improved. In English Language Learning (ELL) scheme, specifically, successful integration of technology will lead to collaborative, autonomous, and active student-centered learning cycle (Linto, 2015;). Students become active participants; they will be able to maximize their learning experience and ultimately, they will be able to acquire high English language proficiency.

For successful bilingual program, maximum English language acquisition and comprehensive digital literacy skills, students need help with their learning. "Learning happens through a cyclical process of engaged low of experience, interspersed with opportunities for reflective understanding and knowledge sharing (Sharples and Pea, 2014)." Thus, learning can only be effective when there is an advanced, more knowledgeable partner that can collaborate with students (Reiser and Tabak, 2014). For the proper and successful use of technology to create effective and engaging learning experience, all *pesantren* stakeholders (including parents) need to realize that they are pivotal partners that the students need. Therefore, it is imperative that adults (teachers, *ustaz/ah*, and parents) are able to provide the much needed guidance and scaffolding on effective technology use and comprehensive language learning.

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