

**An Analysis of IELTS-Based Literacy Levels: A Case Study
at the First Semester Students of FBIB,
Unisbank Semarang**

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ABSTRACT

The study is aimed at describing the levels of literacy on the basis of **IELTS'** standards of competencies. It is a case study at the 1st Semester Students of FBIB, UNISBANK of 2007/2008 academic year. In the study, twenty students were randomly selected out of total number of students consisting of both Diploma and Undergraduate Study Programs. The data were collected by administering IELTS test to those selected students of which the test results were matched against predetermined criteria for literacy levels (Hammond 1992) in order to classify them into the appropriate levels of literacy. The study indicates that all students (100%) were of the performative level of literacy with respect to the overall IELTS scores. Only 25% of the students managed to get informative level in Speaking subtest and 20% in Reading subtest. It is therefore recommended that literacy education be integrated in the curriculum of FBIB UNISBANK, Semarang.

Key Words: Literacy, IELTS

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly known that the students of English Department are supposed to be able, upon completion of their study, to perform considerably well in the four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). Those skills should not be thought of as separate entities. Rather, they have to be considered as one unified whole referred to as in communicative competence which consists of a discourse

competence, linguistic competence sociocultural competence, actional competence, and strategic competence, (Murcia 1995).

The next concern is literacy. Nowadays, it is misleading to consider that literacy only deals with the ability to read and write as it was previously thought of. Literacy of today's notion includes all necessary skills that required of any individual who wants to survive in this competitive global context (Purwanto 2007). Of course the skills differ from one individual to another in accordance with his or her environment of life including the type of work, educational background, etc.

From the above background, I would like to investigate the literacy levels on the basis of competency standard as outlined in the IELTS Test from which necessary actions can be recommended with respect to the development of literacy pedagogy at tertiary level in general and at FBIB UNISBANK context in particular.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research question of the current study can be formulated as 'What average level of literacy do the fifth students of FBIB UNISBANK have pursuant to the competence standard as outlined in the IELTS Test?'

However, in order for the above research question to be able to be systematically approached, it is therefore reformulated into the following sub-research questions:

- (1) What level of literacy in terms of English proficiency do the fifth students of FBIB UNISBANK have pursuant to the competence standard as outlined in the IELTS Test?
- (2) What level of literacy in terms of the listening skill do the fifth students of FBIB UNISBANK have pursuant to the competence standard as outlined in the IELTS Test?
- (3) What level of literacy in terms of the speaking skill do the fifth students of FBIB UNISBANK have pursuant to the competence standard as outlined in the IELTS Test?

(4) What level of literacy in terms of the reading skill do the fifth students of FBIB UNISBANK have pursuant to the competence standard as outlined in the IELTS Test?

(5) What level of literacy in terms of the writing skill do the fifth students of FBIB UNISBANK have pursuant to the competence standard as outlined in the IELTS Test?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is within the theoretical framework of SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics) of Halliday Sydney School in combination with competency standards of the IELTS test on which the discussion on literacy is based.

(1) Literacy

It has been touched upon in the introduction of the study that there used to be a misleading notion of literacy as the ability to read and write. Meanwhile, the true notion of literacy includes all necessary context-based skills required of an individual who wants to survive in any possible discursive practice in the community.

With the modern notion of literacy, two terms, namely **functional literacy** and **critical literacy** were coined (Holme 2001; Purwanto 2007). The former refers to a literacy 'embodying career-based skills with which an individual can function in a society. An artist, for instance, will have to acquire different literacy from that of a policeperson (Purwanto 2007:41), while the latter refers to self-empowerment of an individual, resulting in several movements, such as gender issues, gay rights, ethnic minority, language rights, to mention only a few, that strongly stand against the global spread of a single modern culture (Holme 2001; Purwanto 2007). The emergence of critical literacy has also triggered the birth of critical linguistic analysis as opposed to non-critical linguistic analysis in which social studies take their parts in the analyses of languages.

Likewise, critical literacy has also inspired a different model of curriculum designed—termed as ‘competence based curriculum’. Others may call it ‘literacy based curriculum’ which applies in any school subject with a single aim of providing the students with critical life skills.

(2) Levels of literacy

Some concepts of literacy levels have been discussed and are of similarity (Well 1991; Grant 1986; Freebody and Luke 1990) in which there are, as explicitly explained, four levels of literacy as outlined below.

1) Performative

This level of literacy has actually become a myth, namely being limited to reading and writing skills as similarly expressed by Freebody and Luke (1990), it is a level of literacy limited to phonologizing written symbols and writing the symbol. In other words, it deals with accuracy in spelling and pronunciation, and being able to physically respond to simple instructions in a particular language.

2) Functional

Communication has been introduced in this level of literacy, thereby learners are supposed to be able to function in a particular society (Well 1991). An individual who has achieved the functional level of literacy can respond to a Want Ads., by writing an application letter. He or she can also physically respond to particular signs, for example ‘No Smoking’ including its various symbols.

3) Informative

The indicator of the informative level of literacy is that an individual can get access to particular information from particular media in accordance with his or her discipline. Concretely, (Freebody and Luke 1990) at this level an

individual can relate the content of a text to his or her background knowledge. In other words, confronted with a text, he and she can find out the main idea and supporting details, and can answer questions related to a text.

4) Epistemic

At this level, not only can an individual get access to information from the media but also express it in both oral and written modes. This can be seen in an individual who can write a scientific text, such as a term paper, thesis or dissertation. He or she can also make a public speech on a particular discipline.

The epistemic level of literacy can also be related to a particular level of language proficiency. In this respect to it is in line with an advanced level of language proficiency. Some other people consider this level of literacy as being similar to a critical literacy; still others think that critical literacy is somehow beyond epistemic literacy as it is argued that:

...involves more than engaging with written texts; it involves the ability to reflect critically on texts within their socio-cultural contexts in terms of appropriateness and adequacy of content, in terms of the writer's attitude toward this content and where his attitude positions the reader... also involves the ability to evaluate how well the text has been constructed, that is its effectiveness as a grafted object (Rammond 1992:11).

(3) IELTS

What is IELTS? It stands for International English language Testing System. It is a test of English language skills designed for students who want to study in the medium of English either at university, college or high school (Jakeman and McDowell (2002:4). Accordingly, it will test the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Apart from the overall score, each skill (sub-test) is scored on a band range of 1 to 9 with a normally set band for university admission of 6.5 and a minimum band of 6 in each sub-test. In terms of test administration, there are two types of IELTS, one administered internationally by the test centers, the other institutionally administered by any institution preparing candidates for the international IELTS. In other words, IELTS administered outside the test centers is considered 'institutional' in terms of both the place of administration and the test papers. Therefore, IELTS used in the study is institutional in nature since it makes use of Jakeman and Mcdowell's sample test 1 (2002:30-51).

(4) IELTS' Score Ban in Relation to Levels of Literacy

Despite the fact that there has been no agreement between the IELTS score band and levels of literacy, it is not impossible to link them. As previously mentioned, the normal score band for university admission is 6.5; while the KBK 2004 / KTSP 2006, the high school students are set to achieve the informative level of literacy. Thus, the following table subjectively¹ assumes the relation between IELTS score band and levels of literacy.

Table 1 IELTS Score Ban in Relation to Literacy Levels

No	IELTS Score Ban	Literacy Level
1	6.0– 6.5	informative
2	5.0 - 5.5	functional
3	4.0 - 4.5	performative

The above table was used to map the students' levels of literacy relative to their IELTS score.

METHOD

¹ It means that I determined the ban range without formal statistical formula

The study is a descriptive qualitative research supported by simple quantification in terms of percentage (%) to indicate the occurrence of a particular phenomenon.

(1) Subjects

Twenty randomly selected students of the first semester, FBIB UNISBANK of 2007/2008 academic year consisting of ten undergraduate students (S1) and ten diploma students (D3) participated in IELTS administered and rated by Language Training Center (LTC) UNISBANK, and hence institutional in nature.

(2) Instrument

The instrument employed in the study was **Sample Test 1** Jakeman and McDowell's **IELTS Practice Test Plus** (2002:30-51) without any modification.

(3) Method of Data Collection

IELTS was administered on Saturday September 15th 2007 where the students had no class. The listening test was conducted in FBIB Language Laboratory, while the reading and writing tests were conducted in the Hall of UNISBANK. The speaking test was conducted in the Lecturer's Room with FBIB lecturers (non-native speakers)

The test papers, including the speaking test were rated on a scale of 1-9 of which the test results were the data. The data was then tabulated for ease of reference (See Appendix).

(4) Method of Data Analysis

The data was matched with the criteria set in Table 1 above to classify the students into appropriate levels of literacy in accordance with their test results. As the triangulation of findings, on one occasion, I interviewed two English teachers, one from Karangturi Senior High School, the other from Loyola Senior High. Both schools are labeled as favorite schools with complete facilities. On the other occasion,

I interviewed two other English teachers, one from Al Fatah Senior High School (representing the lower level of High School in terms of facilities) and the other from State Senior High School 15 (representing the middle level of High School in terms of facilities).

FINDINGS

The findings of the study are somehow unbelievable. However, it is the fact that has to be accepted as being factual. Most of the scores are unsatisfactory as shown in the following table of summary of scores

Table 2 Summary of Score

Level of Literacy	IELTS Score				
	Subtest 1 (%)	Subtest 2 (%)	Subtest 3 (%)	Subtest 4 (%)	Overall (%)
Performative	100	75	80	100	100
Functional		25	20		0
Informative	0	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Based on the table above, it is clear that all students fell under the category of **performative** level of literacy in terms of the overall IELTS score. With respect to the Subtest scores, all students fell under the category of **performative** level of literacy in terms of Subtest 1 (Listening). Subtest 2 (Speaking), indicated that only 25% of the students managed to achieve the **functional** level of literacy. Meanwhile, only 20% of the students managed to achieve the **functional** level of literacy in Subtest 3 (Reading). Finally, Subtest 4 (Writing) indicated that all students fell under the category of **performative** level of literacy

DISCUSSION

I will start the discussion of the study with the profiles of Senior High Schools at least in Semarang Municipality where few schools are very modern in terms of well-trained teachers and complete facilities and the majority of schools are not quite well facilitated with ‘regular’ teachers²

When I interviewed the English teachers from two favorite schools, they said it was possible that the third year students were able to achieve IELTS band of 6.5 since the materials of IELTS had been integrated in the English classes. In other words, the students of the favorite schools can be assumed to have achieved the informative level of literacy. It is true that some of the students continue to pursue their education overseas. Better still, they are admitted to favorite universities in Indonesia. When further asked with respect to the National Exam by the Government, they said that most of the students managed to pass the National Exam with ease.

The situation is quite otherwise when I interviewed the regular teachers from Al Fatah Senior High School and State Senior High School 15. They said English was for the teacher a difficult subject to teach, and for the students a difficult subject to learn. There were a number of factors, as they said, that could influence the success of learning English with various constraints of which ‘motivation’ is one. Most of the students were motivated to learn English, not because they want to use the language, but because they have to pass the National Exam. They have no ideas of pursuing education abroad.

When shown the IELTS scores of the subject under study, they commented that it was normal. They would not expect much from the students. Critically, they commented that even most university graduates who want to study abroad have to undertake a special training in IELTS or TOEFL for at least 6 months in order to pass the minimum standard of score for admission to overseas universities.

I was quite shocked to have the reality. However, the show must go on. I realize that UNISBANK is a moderate university that needs to be further developed in terms

² Regular teachers are those teachers with limited trainings, yet loaded with teaching tasks.

of facilities. I also realize the graduates of those few favorite schools will not enroll themselves in any faculty of UNISBANK.

Thus, I am of the opinion that the study started with a test instrument of high standard of difficulty. Had the test with a moderate standard of difficulty been employed, they results might have been different. However, I am confident that the study is valid, since it is a case study which is not meant for generalization.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The conclusion of the study is short and predictable, namely that the first year students of FBIB UNISBANK, majoring in English language and literature (S1), and English language (D3) are within the **performative** level of literacy with reference to the IELTS score.

Therefore, it is recommended that a special English instruction aimed at upgrading their level of literacy up to the informative level be conducted through an **action research project**. The results of the action research can be generalized for use at some other higher education settings with similar students' background of the literary level. The jungle is out there.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jakeman and Mcdowell's sample test 1 (2002:30-51).

Freebody and Luke 1990

Grant 1986

Holme 2001

Murcia 1995

Purwanto, Sugeng (2007)

Rammond 1992

Wells 1991

Appendix I

- A. Score 4.0-4.5 = Performative
- B. Score 5.0-5.5 = Functional
- C. Score 6.0-6.5 = Informative

No	Name Reg. #	Literacy Level	IELTS Score														
			Subtest 1			Subtest 2			Subtest 3			Subtest 4			Overall		
			A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
1		A	*			*						*			*		
		B								*							
		C															
2		A	*			*			*			*			*		
		B															
		C															
3		A	*			*			*			*			*		
		B															
		C															
4		A	*			*						*			*		
		B								*							
		C															
5		A	*			*			*			*			*		
		B															
		C															
6		A	*			*			*			*			*		
		B															
		C															
7		A	*			*			*			*			*		
		B															
		C															
8		A	*			*			*			*			*		
		B															
		C															
9		A	*			*			*			*			*		
		B															
		C															
10		A	*			*			*			*			*		
		B															
		C															
11		A	*			*			*			*			*		
		B															
		C															
12		A	*			*			*			*			*		
		B															
		C															
13		A	*									*			*		
		B					*			*							
		C															
14		A	*						*			*			*		
		B					*										
		C															

15		A	*					*			*			*		
		B				*										
		C														
16		A	*		*			*			*			*		
		B														
		C														
17		A	*								*			*		
		B				*			*							
		C														
18		A	*		*			*			*			*		
		B														
		C														
19		A	*		*			*			*			*		
		B														
		C														
20		A	*					*			*			*		
		B				*										
		C														
Total		A	20		15			16			20			20		
		B				5			4							
		C														