Skill-based English Language Teaching Programs' Issues and Merits in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Skill-based English language teaching (ELT) programs offer various learning opportunities for learners to master the skills in using the language. However, research on the challenges of such programs is still scarce in literature. Therefore, this study was aimed to examine recent research articles on the implementation of skill-based ELT programs in higher education in terms of the types of skills featured in the programs, the issues, and the merits of the programs. The study employed a systematic literature review. The reviewed articles were retrieved from 2014 to 2022 using digital paper search tools and filtered systematically using exclusion and inclusion criteria. A total of twenty-five manuscripts were included and analysed under the three key points: types of skills featured in the ELT programs, issues related to the implementation of skill-based ELT programs, and merits of the programs. The results showed that the majority of studies covered multiple skills, with only seven studies reporting one skill taught in the programs. Interestingly, there were only six studies which reported the issues of the programs, while twenty reviewed articles discussed the merits. The issues revealed from the study were categorised into those related to students, teachers, and course materials; some of which were specified as materials in the syllabuses and diverse students' backgrounds. The study found out that the advantages of using skill-based approach in ELT outweighed the drawbacks since it could help students develop skills more accurately, deepen knowledge, improve technology literacy, accommodate their needs, and enjoy the lessons. With this study, a further investigation on the development of the program design is suggested, particularly in designing skill-based programs which enable learners to use the learned skills and knowledge in real-life situations.

Keywords: curriculum, ELT programs, higher education, learning

materials, skill-based syllabus

INTRODUCTION

Many language teaching programs use skill-based approaches in their instructional designs, considering the aims of language learning are to develop learners' language skills. The mastery of skills as well as knowledge is highly valued when learners become the centre of learning (Reigeluth et al., 2016). This concept of learner centeredness can be said to highlight the skills as the value in language learning.

Traditionally, language skills can be divided into two categories, receptive and productive skills. The former includes skills of listening and reading, while the latter encompasses the skills of speaking and writing. According to Richards (2001), learners' abilities to use language for reading, writing, listening, and speaking became the principles of organizing the content of language teaching in order to cater the development of these four skills. Meanwhile, Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2018) for languages, has replaced the traditional model of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) with its communicative language activities and strategies, which are presented under four modes of communication: reception, production, interaction, and mediation. In the present time, furthermore, Indonesian curriculum, named Emancipated Curriculum or "Kurikulum Merdeka," urges twenty first century skills to be integrated in English language learning (Kurikulum Merdeka, 2022). It is therefore worthwhile to investigate how these language related skills are accommodated in ELT programs designed by using skill-based approaches.

Skill-based English language teaching (ELT) programs offer various learning opportunities for learners to be competent in using the English language. A study on the evaluation of a skill-based language teaching program found out that the ELT program had overall positive aspects because the program helped students to develop strategies in every language skill (Arkin, 2010). However, the study also discussed some issues concerning the skill-based syllabus design in the language teaching program. Despite this, research on the challenges of such programs is still scarce in literature. Therefore, this study was aimed to examine recent research articles on the implementation of skill-based ELT programs particularly in higher education setting, in terms of the types of skills featured in the programs, the issues, and the merits of the programs.

Language Teaching Programs

As a point of departure, forms of language teaching can be divided into curriculum, syllabus, and materials. Richard (2001) defined curriculum as a broader concept than that of syllabus. Curriculum is referred to all activities in which children are engaged under the policies of the school. These include what students learn, how they learn it, how teachers help them learn, what sorts of supporting materials are utilized, what kinds of assessment methods are employed, and in what kind of facilities the process take place (Richards, 2001). Meanwhile, syllabus is formulated as kinds of contents to be covered by a given course, considered as a part of the school program (Richards, 2001).

Another form of language teaching is specified as instructional materials on which language input and classroom practice are largely based (Richards, 2001). In both instructional material development and classroom teaching, the objective is to design activities that provide teachers and learners with an appropriate level of difficulty, engage them, and provide motivation and useful practices (Richards, 2001).

Skill-Based Approaches

A program of language teaching can be designed by using various approaches. For instance, Nunan (1988) presented different types of language learning syllabus based on the orientations, some of which are product oriented, process oriented, task based, content based, grammar based, and function-notion based.

In particular, a product-oriented syllabus focuses on the knowledge and skills that learners should acquire when following instructions. When used as the basis in designing a language instruction, skills can appear in several different forms of instructional materials. In Nunan's natural approach, Krashen and Terrel asserted that most learning objectives can be divided into one of two categories: basic personal communication skills and academic learning skills. They can be further subcategorized into oral and written forms. Besides in product-oriented and natural approach syllabuses, skills can also be incorporated as the framework in functional syllabuses, which mainly focus on listening and speaking skills (Richards, 2001) or any communicative purposes (Nunan, 1988). These types of syllabuses value the use of the language over the linguistic form. According to Richards (2001), abilities in using language for listening, speaking, reading, and writing became the underlying principles to organize the so-called skills syllabus. He also

pointed out another term for skill-based approaches, known as competency-based syllabus which specified kinds of competencies expected from language learners in relation to specific situations and activities. Meanwhile, Nation & Macalister (2010) exemplified the use of skill-based approach for sequencing the language course content in the form of modular syllabus. In this type of syllabus, each instructional unit or module is independent, not assuming prior knowledge of previous modules.

Merits of Skill-Based Programs

According to Richards (2001) (in Rajaee et al., 2012), skill-based syllabus has some strengths. First, it focuses on behaviours and specific tasks. By incorporating specific tasks into courses and teaching materials, skills-based syllabus has the advantage of focusing on performance. It also can facilitate learners to learn skills that can be transferred into many other situations. In addition to these, this type of program allows teachers to identify teachable and learnable units of materials.

The design of language teaching programs should consider the merits of their implementation. Learning opportunities offered for language learners need to be taken into consideration. A skill-based curriculum is designed to teach a specific skill in a language. The secondary purpose may be to develop more general proficiency in the language, learning only incidentally any information that might be available if a language skill is applied.

Issues of Skill-Based Programs

It is also worth noting that skill-based programs may bring about some drawbacks or challenges. One of the frequently encountered issues of skill-based programs is that specific language proficiency is dependent or independent of overall language proficiency (Karahnke, 1987 in Rajaee et al., 2012). Besides this, skill-based instruction is too narrow, so it may program students for particular behaviours or isolate them from ambitions that skills do not prepare them for, such as education rather than entry-level jobs (Auerbach, 1986 in Rajaee et al., 2012). Furthermore, learning cannot be based solely on a syllabus that is a list of skills, and teachers could feel lost since they thought they had little to no assistance in selecting texts to utilize to give students the opportunity to practice these skills.

Another issue identified in the study by Rajaee et al. (2012) was that the list of skills could not be comprehended in the same way by all likely participants. For example, there will at least be a general understanding of what is intended if the goal of a syllabus is for

students to comprehend frequent applications of simple verb tenses. On the other hand, if the goal is to "infer meaning from context," it is more difficult to determine what would constitute success. Furthermore, if the goal is as nebulous as "to deal with customer complaints on the telephone," it is impossible to predict whether teacher and student will interpret it in the same way, let alone whether either will do so on two separate days.

Research Questions and Purposes

Considering the significance of skill-based approaches in language teaching programs despite the potential challenges, this study was aimed at examining recent research articles on the implementation of skill-based ELT programs in higher education in terms of the types of skills featured in the programs, the issues, and the merits of the programs. As a framework of this review study, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. What sorts of skills are covered in the studies of skill-based ELT programs?
2. What are the issues of the implementation of skill-based ELT programs?
3. What merits do skill-based ELT programs offer?

METHOD

This study is qualitative, employing SLR (systematic literature review) as the design. It is a form of secondary study that employs a clearly defined process to locate, evaluate, and impartially analyze all information linked to certain research issues (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). This study was aimed to examine recent research articles on the implementation of skill-based English Language Teaching (ELT) programs in higher education in terms of the types of skills featured in the programs, the issues, and the merits of the programs.

The reviewed articles were retrieved as a result of the search using digital paper search tools with the keywords "skill-based language teaching programs," "higher education," "issues," and "merits." Filtered systematically using exclusion and inclusion criteria, the articles should:

- Be published from 2014 to 2022
- Be published in English
- Have full texts available
- Be published in educational journals
- Use higher education as the setting
- Cover English language teaching programs

A total of twenty-five manuscripts were included in this study and then analysed with content analysis to identify the types of skills featured in the ELT programs. Adopting the previous studies by Arkin (2010) and Karakus (2021), this study analysed the issues related to the implementation of skill-based ELT programs and also the merits of the programs.

The present study used inter-rater reliability. Codes for the included studies were determined and discussed by the researchers. The codes used the first letters of skill based referred as SB1, SB2, SB3, and so forth.

This study's validity was assessed on five levels, including descriptive, theoretical, interpretive, external, and evaluative validity (Karakuş, 2021). The validity measurement was based on Maxwell (1992). Descriptive validity features a detailed presentation of the studied phenomenon. Three aspects including types of skills featured in the ELT programs, issues related to the implementation of skill-based ELT programs, and merits of the programs were specified by creating tables. Another dimension of validity is theoretical or internal validity, which refers to how a situation is conceptually defined. In this context, issues and merits of skill-based ELT programs expressed in this study were examined in a comprehensive way in different fields such as pedagogy, linguistics, psychology, and educational sciences, without being bound by any limitations. A careful examination of the three key points of the programs was done in order to reflect reality and the scope of these areas. The interpretive validity, which is the third dimension, relates to the fact that researchers can convey research findings objectively. In this study, published studies were used as the data sources. The expected objectivity can be made with direct quotations from these documents, and the findings and discussions were also far from subjectivity. The fourth level is external validity or generalizability. To achieve this, a detailed description of coding and the method used in this research will make this process to be used in other research environments. Finally, evaluative validity deals with the clarity of the process being studied, the consistency of results, and the approval of other researchers. Accordingly, to ensure the validity of this study, the coding used was elaborated clearly and concisely, in addition to the accessibility of the included documents.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented and discussed in this section in accordance with the research questions.

1. The implementation of skill-based English language teaching (ELT) programs

The first research question is "What sorts of skills are covered in the studies of skill-based ELT programs?" The following table shows that a variety of skills were covered in the studies of skill-based ELT programs in the last ten years.

Table 1:
Studies of Skill-based ELT Programs

No	Code	Publication Year	Title	Journal/Database	Skills covered
1	SB1	2014	"Learner Autonomy in Skill-Based Language Improvement Courses in an Undergraduate ELT Program"	Eastern Mediterranean University repository	reading, writing, listening, pronunciation, oral communication
2	SB2	2014	"A gender-based study of Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic awareness: The role of receptive skill-based teaching"	International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature	listening
3	SB3	2015	"From a Knowledge-Based Language Curriculum to a Competency-Based One: The CEFR in Action in Asia"	Asian EFL Journal	CEFR skill model
4	SB4	2017	"Project-based Language Teaching and Learning: An Alternative to Skill-based Instruction?: A Neo-social Interactionist Perspective"	The journal of Rikkyo University Language Center	listening, reading, writing, or speaking
5	SB5	2018	"Improving Students' Listening Skill through Note-Taking Technique (A Classroom Action Research to the Third Year Students of Study Program in English Language Education at Almuslim University)"	Semantic Scholar	listening
6	SB6	2018	"Using Authentic Online Materials for Speaking Class: A Study of Students' Perception about the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language"	Atlantis Press	speaking
7	SB7	2018	"Soft-Skill Based Syllabus in Legal English Courses"	Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes	soft skills, life skills

8	SB8	2018	"The Effectiveness of Grammar Tutoring Program Based on Students' Feedback Batch 2016 ELESP"	LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching	grammar
9	SB9	2018	"The role of grammar courses in students' writing products: a case study in Düzce University1"	Semantic Scholar	reading-writing, listening-speaking, grammar
10	SB10	2019	"Designing ICT Competences-Integrated Syllabuses of Speaking Courses (Design and Development Study of English Language Education Program Syllabuses)"	IJLECR (International Journal of Language Education and Cultural Review)	ICT, speaking, General Speaking, Professional Speaking and Academic Speaking
11	SB11	2019	"Language Teaching in Vocational Higher Education Based on Industry Needs"	Proceedings of the UNNES International Conference on English Language Teaching, Literature, and Translation (Atlantis Press)	listening, reading, writing, speaking
12	SB12	2019	"Designing ICT Competences – Integrated Syllabuses of Writing Courses (Design and Development Study of English Language Education Study Program Syllabuses)"	International Journal of Language Education and Cultural Review (IJLECR)	ICT competences – integrated writing: Basic Writing, Professional Writing, Creative Writing, and Academic Writing
13	SB13	2019	"Need Analysis on Developing Skill-Based Materials for D3 Nursing Students"	LET: Linguistics, Literature and English Teaching Journal	basic English, work-related language skills, and academic-related language skills
14	SB14	2019	"Developing Skill-Based Materials for Helping D3 Nursing Students Go International"	JEES (Journal of English Educators Society)	speaking, writing, reading, basic English skills, working abroad skills, studying abroad skills
15	SB15	2020	"Need for 21st Century Skills Education for Teachers"	Roots International Journal of Multidisciplinary Researches	21st century skills
16	SB16	2020	"The effect of integrating teaching cross-cultural knowledge and teaching listening skill in tertiary education on improving EFL students' intercultural communication competence"	The Social Sciences	listening, cross-cultural knowledge
17	SB17	2021	"Skill-based ESP Classroom: Teaching for Preserving and Enhancing Oman's	Arab World English Journal	writing, speaking, business vocabulary

Skill-based English Language Teaching Programs' …
Febriyanti Utami, Sri Sumarni, Darmahusni

			Comparative Advantages in an Era of Economic and Digital Transformation"		
18	SB18	2021	"A TPACK-in Practice Model for Enhancing EFL Students' Readiness to Teach with Ed-Tech Apps"	International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (iJIM)	designing teaching-learning with technology
19	SB19	2021	"Investigating Difficulties of Self-Study in Reading Skills of English Language Students of the High-Quality Training Program at Can Tho University"	International journal of science and management studies	reading, self-study
20	SB20	2021	"Learning Continuum in a Blended Mode: A Case of a Skill-based Course"	Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research	Written Communication and Analysis
21	SB21	2021	"Designing Life and Career Skills-Integrated Speaking Syllabuses for English Language Education Study Program"	SAGA: Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics	speaking, life and career skills
22	SB22	2022	"Student Difficulties on Structure and Written Expression Section of TOEFL in Higher Education at Metro City"	Curricula: journal of teaching and learning	grammar (SWE TOEFL)
23	SB23	2022	"An art-based approach to teaching English language speaking skills"	8th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'22)	speaking
24	SB24	2022	"English Foreign Language Students' Perceptions of an Online English Speaking Club in Higher Education"	Advances in social science, education and humanities research	speaking
25	SB25	2022	"Outcome-Based Syllabus Designs for the Teaching of English to Students of Medicine Faculty, University of Mataram, Indonesia"	Journal of English language teaching and applied linguistics	reading, listening

Based on the review, the majority of studies featured ELT programs which covered multiple skills, while only seven studies reporting one skill taught in the programs. Skill-based language teaching programs are also termed "competency-based programs" (Richards, 2001), and this can be seen in some included studies. The majority of the articles focused on language skills, namely listening and writing. Meanwhile, in another study, soft skills were used as the base of its ELT program. It was also found out that some

ELT programs designed specific skills to be the goals of the programs. These include ICT skills, 21st century skills, "advanced skill-based course on written communication and analysis," life skills, career skills, and academic-related language skills. To summarize, the total of sixteen (16) skill categories are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2:
Skills featured in the studies of skill-based ELT programs

No	Skills featured in the studies
1	L, R, S, W
2	Pronunciation
3	Grammar
4	oral communication
5	soft skills
6	life skills
7	ICT skills
8	life and career skills
9	written communication and analysis
10	self-study
11	21st century skills
12	cross-cultural knowledge
13	business vocabulary
14	design teaching-learning with technology
15	working abroad skills
16	studying abroad skills

2. The issues in the implementation of skill-based English language teaching programs

The second research question is "What are the issues of the implementation of skill-based ELT programs?"

Table 3:
Issues of Skill-based ELT Programs

No	Issues related to	Issues	Study Codes
1	teachers	the instructors' less positive perceptions of learner autonomy; lack of knowledge; pedagogical; technical challenges	SB1, SB3, SB18
2	students	students' backgrounds; time management; learning environment	SB1, SB19
3	materials	particular learned skills; syllabus	SB3, SB4, SB19, SB22

As a result of the review, frequently stated issues of the implementation of skill-based ELT programs can be divided into three: those related to teachers, students, and materials.

Particularly for students, difficulties can be found in the way of understanding the sort of skills as the learning targets (Rajaee et al, 2012). Besides that, as the focus is on skill mastery such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking, enabling skills like grammar have little input in the textbooks (Baptiste, 2010). In addition to the insufficiency in grammar, the textbooks used also provide a limited range of topic specific vocabulary.

Meanwhile for teachers, dealing with different students' backgrounds was a significant challenge in implementing skill-based teaching (Arkin, 2010 and Baghbankarimi, 2014). Some other concerns from teachers were related to teaching materials and syllabus or curriculum which is too compressed. Furthermore, skill-based programs may refer to CEFR (Common European Framework Reference), while teachers still found difficulties in referring to CEFR. Lastly, the teachers have also been hampered by the absence of empirical data demonstrating the application of learnt abilities in real-world circumstances, thus impeding them in incorporating skill-based approaches in language classes.

Having been identified, these challenges are expected to be overcome accordingly. Program designers and teachers as well as policy makers can take part in solving the problems.

3. The merits of skill-based English language teaching programs

The third research question is "What merits do skill-based ELT programs offer?"

Table 4:
Merits of Skill-based ELT Programs

No	Merits	Study Codes
1	developing skills more accurately (e.g. productive skills, communicative competence, intercultural communication competence, pragmatic competence, lifelong learning skills, writing skills, speaking skills)	SB2, SB9, SB14, SB15, SB16, SB20, SB23, SB24
2	deepening knowledge and skills (e.g. techno-pedagogical content, grammar)	SB1, SB8, SB10, SB12, SB18
3	improving technology literacy	SB1, SB12, SB17, SB20
4	accommodating students' needs	SB2, SB7, SB13, SB25
5	making students enjoy lessons due to stimulating topics/materials or active learning environment	SB6, SB7, SB17, SB20
6	promoting learner autonomy	SB1, SB18, SB20

7	raising intrinsic motivation	SB7, SB13, SB14
8	enhancing learning strategies and experience	SB7, SB20, SB24
9	improving transferable skills such as oral communication, problem solving, critical thinking, adaptability, flexibility, and time management	SB17, SB18, SB20
10	facilitating students to have successful future (e.g. working and/or studying abroad, future employability, professional success)	SB3, SB13, SB17
11	raising awareness	SB1, SB2
12	creating knowledge	SB1, SB12
13	increasing creativity and imagination	SB6, SB18
14	promoting collaboration/network building	SB20, SB24
15	using globally recognized standard	SB3, SB13
16	feeling involved in real-life activities	SB6
17	dealing with particular difficulties effectively	SB8
18	enabling students to gain maximum outcomes due to effective and efficient materials	SB14
19	facilitating meaningful materials	SB14
20	lowering anxiety	SB14
21	increasing confidence	SB24

As a result of the review, frequently stated merits provided by skill-based language teaching programs are developing skills more accurately, deepening knowledge, improving technology literacy, accommodating students' needs, and making students enjoy the lessons.

Prior to the design of programs, needs analysis is important to be conducted (Baptiste, 2010; Zangoei et al., 2014; Hradilova, 2018; and Yansyah et al., 2019) so that language skills that students need to acquire can be effectively learned. Besides, students can benefit from the regular assessment once certain skills have been studied (Baptiste, 2010). Furthermore, not only do the instructional programs allow the enhancement of learning strategies and experience (Arkin, 2010; Hradilova, 2018; and Ray et al., 2021), these also promote technology literacy, knowledge deepening, and knowledge creation (Baghbankarimi, 2014 and Syifa et al., 2019).

The use of skill-based approach in ELT programs has also enabled language learners to improve the necessary skills of the 21st century, such as communication, adaptability, critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration, not to mention the growth in students' intrinsic motivation in learning. For these reasons, the

use of skill-based approach in language teaching programs can be said to be effective in providing a wide range of opportunities for students to grow personally and as a team. When students are able to acquire the set skills, it is hoped that they will possess future employability and gain professional success (Moser, 2015 and Heckadon et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

The implementation of skill-based approaches was found in different forms of English language teaching (ELT) programs. Multiple skills were featured in the majority of the reviewed articles in this study, while some studies focused on one skill only. Skill-based ELT programs in the last 10 years featured not only the four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) and enabling skills (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) but also 21st century skills, ICT skills, and others.

The issues revealed from the study were categorised into those related to students, teachers, and course materials. The study concludes that the advantages of using skill-based approach in ELT outweighed the drawbacks since it could help students develop skills more accurately, deepen knowledge, improve technology literacy, accommodate their needs, and enjoy the lessons.

Even though there are a few challenges mainly related to materials in the syllabuses and diverse students' backgrounds, the implementation of skill-based language teaching programs is predicted to remain popular, so the development of the program design is suggested, particularly in designing skill-based programs which enable learners to use the knowledge and implement the learned skills in real-life circumstances. Therefore, this review has significance for the designs of ELT programs in the future.

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