TEACHERS' DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING THEMATIC LEARNING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to identify teachers' difficulties in implementing thematic learning in elementary schools. The study was a phenomenology-type qualitative research. The data were gathered by interview followed by focus group discussion; the focus group discussion involved 15 elementary school teachers from 8 provinces that have implemented 2013 Curriculum. The data were analyzed by means of Cresswell steps. The results of the study showed that teachers encountered obstacles in selecting appropriate problems and themes within thematic, scientific and PBL and in arranging time for PjBL. The availability of learning facility had still been limited. The problems that had been found in the assessment stage was the teachers' capacity in selecting appropriate techniques, in creating good instruments and in formulating clear assessment criteria.

Key words: *teachers' difficulties, thematic learning, elementary schools.*

Introduction

The change of learning paradigm in the 21st century that increasingly demands students to have complex capabilities also brings changes in the curriculum contents. Chen (2012) explains that the traditional learning activities with their teacher-centered paradigm always follows the material

sequence that has been contained in a textbook. Such paradigm has been considered less relevant to the demands of the 21st century that urge students to be active and creative thinking. Therefore, Harris & Rooks (2010) state that the new learning paradigm urges that teachers should help students in developing their expertise and capacity in locating and linking concepts in discovery or invention activities or also known widely as student-centered approach.

The curriculum change is also confirmed by Liu & Wang (2010), namely that in accordance to the definition of integrated curriculum the learning contents should be well arranged in such a way that it will be able to provide better learning impacts. Multiple changes toward the approaches or the models in the learning activities and the competencies that students should master are delivered to schools, especially to educators or teachers, gradually. The significant matter that has changed in the 2013 Curriculum, compared to the previous curricula, is the new approaches that should be conducted namely the thematic approach. This approach contains scientific learning, problem-based learning (PBL) and project-based learning (PjBL).

Thematic learning is one of the learning strategies that have been proposed by many researchers and psychologists (Mirjalili, Jabbari & Rezai, 2012). The reasons for implementing the thematic learning in the 2013 Curriculum, as having been suggested by Min, Rashid & Nazri (2012), is that students might learn better because the learning activities are initiated by problems that have been presented under the selected theme. Davis & Shankar-Brown (2011) assert that thematic learning is an approach that has been suitable for the learners' development in the 21st century. The reason is that the steps in the thematic learning enable teachers to provide challenges toward students in order to think widely regarding the theme that they are studying. Then, they should learn this theme in order to link it toward the science that takes their interest.The importance of thematic learning is also provided by Mirjalili, Jabbari & Rezai (2012) who state that in thematic learning

there is a process of associating. This statement is in accordance to the mandate of 2013 Curriculum in relation to scientific learning.

Thematic curriculum is a set of organized learning experiences that provide students the opportunity to explore widely the main learning theme (Finch, Frantz, Mooney & Aneke, 1997). Min, Rashid & Nazri (2012) and Chen (2012), state namely that thematic learning has been one of the effective strategies for contextual learning that is related to the students' daily experiences. In addition, Finch, Frantz, Mooney & Aneke (1997), Anthony & Walshaw (2009), Chen (2012), Min, Rashid & Nazri (2012) and Rosenshine (2012) assert that professional teachers should support students in creating a connection among multiple problem solving methods, between mathematical topics and representations and between mathematics and students' daily life. In thematic learning teachers should design learning curricula, learning methods and assessments and they should also associate the materials to multiple domains of science within one theme that has been selected for the learning activities. Thematic learning does not only emphasize the multiple domains of science but also the multiple cognitive capacities such as reading, mathematics, science, writing and social (John, 2015; Finch, Frantz, Mooney & Aneke, 1997).

In other words, thematic learning involves the use of themes as the starting point of learning process that will strengthen the students with the knowledge that they have attained. Krey (1994) states that there are many kinds of theme that might be used in a thematic learning in order to improve the students' learning experiences. Another learning approaches that belong to thematic learning as mandate of 2013 Curriculum is scientific learning, PBL and PjBL. Scientific learning is a learning process that has steps namely observing, questioning, gathering information, associating and communicating. On the other hand PBL is a learning model that starts with an introduction toward relevant problems in the learning cycle and to motivate the students in their learning process (Prince, 2004). PBL provides an opportunity for the students to be active, cooperative and

collaborative. Thematic integrative learning might be implemented toward elementary school students by creating projects as the materials for establishing a connection toward multiple domains of science or of subjects for the sake of achieving the learning objectives that have been embedded to the students' mind (Bradbury, 2008). Therefore, PjBL is also relevant to implement among students comprehensively in order to increase their knowledge the projects that will be assigned are interdisciplinary.

Looking at the relevance of thematic learning in 2013 Curriculum, there have been many studies that display the effectiveness of thematic learning. According to a study by Liu & Wang (2010), web-based thematic learning has positive impacts toward the students' concept learning. The results of another study by Ardianti, Prasetyo & Susanti (2014) have found that thematic learning by means of discovery-based module has impacts toward the students' learning results. Min, Rashid & Nazri (2012) have also found that there is a significant relationship between the teachers' understanding toward thematic approach and the teachers' learning practice. The results of this study show that the length of teachers' teaching experience does not show significant differences in thematic learning practice. Another study by John (2015) also uncovers that teachers who understand thematic curriculum and students' needs should be more effective in implementing the new thematic curriculum and the integrated curriculum.

Recalling the importance of integrated and connected learning in all domains of science for the 21st century learners, the development of higher order thinking skills is heavily demanded along with the increasing global competition. This is a challenge for teachers in creating such learning. In addition, Davies & Shankar-Brown (2011) state the importance of preparing a generation of educators in order to develop teachers' competencies in planning and implementing thematic learning. Each curriculum change in a school will heavily depend on teachers' competence and

expertise (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Therefore, the researchers through this study would like to uncover the teachers' difficulty in implementing thematic learning within elementary schools.

Methodology of Research

The study was a phenomenology-type qualitative research. The data were gathered by means of FGD and were followed up by means of in-depth interview in order to gather the elementary school teachers' difficulties in implementing thematic learning. The participants in the study were 15 elementary school teachers (T1-T15) from 8 provinces in Indonesian and the participants consisted of 8 male teachers and 7 female teachers. There were 5 teachers (T1, T2, T9, T10 and T11) had not attended the training of 2013 Curriculum, while the remaining 10 teachers had attended the training. 3 teachers attended the training or the socialization of 2013 Curriculum in their school (T5, T6 and T8), T7 had been a national instructor of 2013 Curriculum and the remaining teachers attended the training or the socialization of 2013 Curriculum in the regency level. At the beginning of data gathering, the researchers held the FGD; then, the researchers followed up the FGD by means of in-depth interview. The data were analyzed by referring to the steps of Creswell (2014) namely: defining and preparing data; reading overall data; encoding data in order to define the theme and to create description; establishing the inter-theme connection; and interpreting the theme or the description.

Results of Research

Based on the results of data analysis, the researcher would like to categorize the results in terms of teachers' understanding, learning implementation, learning facilities and assessment conduct in order to uncover the difficulties of elementary school teachers in implementing thematic learning.

1. Teachers' Understanding

The results of the study regarding the teachers' understanding toward thematic learning were presented in Table 1 as follows.

Table 1. The Teachers' Understanding toward the Thematic Learning

Description	Difficulty and Cause	Strategy
The teachers' understanding toward the curriculum, including the competence standard	Many teachers who responded negatively the process of curriculum transition.	1. Continuous training and mentoring 2. Curriculum socialization and training that would not only be limited to the theoretical review 3. The already trained teachers who should share their knowledge and insight to their colleagues 4. The providence of mentoring program that involved the core schools as the center of information and the impacted schools by the government 5. The process of pursuing in-depth curriculum understanding independently.
	Many teachers who did not want to change their mindset.	
	The teachers were not prepared to deal with the curriculum change.	
	Many teachers who had not understood the new curriculum completely.	
The teachers' understanding toward the thematic learning	The teachers had already understood the definition of thematic learning.	
The teachers' understanding toward the PBL	The teachers were relatively familiar to the term PBL.	
The teachers' understanding toward the PjBL	Teacher was not familiar with PjBL	
The teachers' understanding toward the assessment	The teachers in general understood the assessment aspects within 2013 Curriculum.	
	The teachers had not understood the details of assessment process.	

The obstacles in changing the teachers' understanding regarding the curriculum change was the teachers' negative stigma, the teachers' individual factors such as they still had not opened themselves toward the change and they still had low spirit of independent learning. Multiple massive steps that the government had taken in socializing the curriculum had brought about positive impacts. However, in the practice there was a single fact that not all teachers had completely understood 2013 Curriculum. The training program had not been able to embrace and to provide understanding toward all teachers. In overall, teachers' understanding toward multiple learning methods or approaches that had been mandated by 2013 Curriculum had not been sufficient. Teachers were familiar to these approaches but they had lack understanding toward the essence and the steps of learning activities that should be conducted under these approaches.

2. Learning Implementation

The results of the study regarding the teachers' difficulty in implementing thematic learning activities would be displayed in Table 2 as follows.

Table 2. Teachers' Difficulties in Thematic Learning Implementation

Description	Cause	Strategy
The teachers' difficulty in implementing the thematic learning	The learning plan and preparation was relatively difficult.	1. It took creativity in order to perform inter-item association within one theme. 2. There should be an optimization toward the role of school principal as a supervisor. The school principal might control the learning
	The difficulties were responded by returning back to the partial learning process.	
The teachers' difficulty in implementing the scientific learning	It was difficult to implement the scientific learning path.	
	It was frequently occurred that the contexts had not been contextual.	
The teachers' difficulty in implementing the problem-	The PBL model had been rarely implemented because it was considered difficult and	

based learning	complicated.	implementation through a correction toward the learning sets and their implementation. The school principal might provide multiple educations toward the teachers through his or her role as a supervisor.
	It was difficult to determine the appropriate problem base.	
	The teachers were still convenient with the teacher-centered approach.	
The teachers' difficulty in implementing the project-based learning	It was difficult to manage the time in the PjBL approach.	
	It was difficult to select the appropriate project.	
	The teachers were still convenient with the teachers-centered approach.	
The teachers' difficulty in exercising the HOTS	There were many teachers who had not understood the HOTS and its development.	
	The students had not been accustomed to the HOTS and its development.	

In the study, the researchers found that the learning process and the scientific concept had not been totally implemented. Teachers were trapped into the scientific learning sequence that involved the process of 5M. Problem-based learning and project-based learning had also been less implemented because both approaches had been considered difficult and complicated. Therefore, most of the teachers still believed that it would be more convenient for them to implement the teacher-centered learning. The challenges and the demands of the 21st century for developing the higher-order thinking skill (HOTS) capacity had not appeared as well in the learning process. Teachers and students were equally unfamiliar to the development of HOTS capacity. The difficulties here included the process implementation in accordance to the curriculum and the learning content that had not developed the HOTS capacity.

3. Learning Facilities

The results of the study regarding the difficulties that elementary school teachers encountered in terms of learning facilities would be displayed in Table 3 as follows.

Table 3. The Teachers' Difficulties in Terms of Learning Facilities

Description	Cause	Strategy
Book availability	There had been delays in the book distribution toward the schools.	1. The school directed the teachers and the students to download the books from the Internet. 2. The school suggested the teachers to design a lesson plan according to the new curriculum independently and this included the theme composition.
	The book quantity had not been balanced to the number of students.	
	The library quality had been less sufficient.	
Learning media/supporting display	The teachers rarely operated the learning media.	The teachers were demanded to be creative in providing the learning media independently
	The variation in terms of school facility had been high from one school to another.	
	The learning media availability had been limited.	

The book distribution delay and the book quantity had been the mostly found problems in the school in related to learning facilities. The limited availability of learning media demanded teachers to be more creative; as a result, they provided these media independently. The availability of learning facilities in the form of learning sources and media had been very limited so that teachers were demanded to be more creative in order that the learning process might run well according to the curriculum's mandate.

4. Assessment Conduct

The results of the study regarding the teachers' difficulty in implementing the assessment through thematic learning would be displayed in Table 4 as follows.

Table 4. The Teachers Difficulties in Terms of Assessment Conduct

Description	Cause	Strategy
Spiritual attitude assessment	The number of students within one classroom had been relatively many	The score output was designed in two versions namely in description and in number
	The assessment frequency had been high	
	There had not been similar learning results among the teachers.	
Social attitude assessment	The teachers had not been able to select and to implement the effective and efficient attitude assessment technique.	
Knowledge assessment	The determination of test item composition had been difficult.	
	Teachers had difficulties especially with regards to the mapping of students' capacity.	
Skills assessment	It had been difficult to design an assessment rubric.	
Did the assessment should involve the HOTS one?	The assessment had not reached the HOTS	
School report writing	The teachers had difficulties in creating the description.	

In general, the difficulties that the researchers found in the assessment stage were the teachers' capacity in selecting the appropriate technique, the design of good instrument that achieved HOTS

and the design of clear score description especially in the attitude assessment. Then, another obstacle that the researchers found in the skill assessment was the rubric design. Another difficulty that teachers encountered in the final process was that that the teachers had not been accustomed to describe the scores into the descriptive statements of regarding the students' capacity clearly and briefly.

Discussion

1. Teachers' Understanding

One of the dynamics that appeared in the process of curriculum change in Indonesia had been the teachers' response. Several facts showed that there had been many teachers who displayed negative response toward the curriculum change. The root of such problem had been the teachers' unpreparedness toward the change. As a result, there had been many teachers who refused to change their mindset in conducting the learning process. Such phenomenon certainly was in contrary to the statement that teachers should have sufficient capability in order to increase students' learning achievements in order that the learning process would be successful and be able to accommodate the students' needs (Martel, 2009). According to Kalelioğlu & Gülbahar (2014, p.248), in the 21st Century an individual should have the capacity of critical thinking, problem solving and creative thinking.

Therefore, it had been the government's duty to socialize the new curriculum. However, there had been many teachers who admitted that they had not attained an in-depth understanding toward 2013 Curriculum. Such conditions became worse because training program that had been conducted had still been oriented toward the theoretical matters. In addition to complaining the problems of quality, teachers also complained the quantity of short training period. The training materials would not be able to explain real situations that might possibly happen in the learning process. Teachers

should realize that training had been a process of preliminary introduction and multiple processes toward understanding the curriculum should be conducted personally by each teacher. Chen (2012) stated that teachers should have strong and powerful materials, teachers should realize ideas and themes that would be implemented in the learning process and teachers should understand how well they were in teaching the learning concepts toward their students. The reasons behind the low quality and quantity of training program and the lack of efforts in pursuing in-depth understanding independently caused teachers to not be able to provide any explanation toward their colleagues.

The mandate of elementary school curriculum had been to implement PBL and PjBL. In general, PBL had been more familiar among the teachers in comparison to PjBL. Through in-depth investigation, the researchers found a fact that the teachers had not understood both models profoundly. Most of the teachers stated that the learning process might be in accordance to the suggested models but they did not plan the model syntax. As a result, when they were asked about the syntax the teachers were confused because they could not categorize to which model their learning process belonged to.

In order to facilitate the process of implementing 2013 Curriculum, the government held mentoring programs that involved core schools and impacted schools. Core schools referred to the schools that had been appointed as the center of information. Programs that had been implemented in order to support the implementation of 2013 Curriculum was called ON namely the mentoring of targeted teachers that would be conducted by the regency-level instructors, IN namely the discussion around multiple findings during the ON program and solutions.

2. Thematic Learning Implementation

Many problems that occurred around the teachers' understanding led to many problems in the learning implementation. The earliest problem occurred in the theme planning. Many teachers complained the difficulty in combining multiple lessons into a single theme. The results of the study

here strengthened those of the previous one by Finch, Frantz, Mooney & Aneke (1997), which stated that teachers had difficulties in understanding and in implementing the thematic curriculum.

Beside of that multiple cases that had been presented by teachers as an introduction rarely encouraged the students to reason successfully in scientific approach. Unfortunately, reasoning had been a process that might be the students' gate to perform an in-depth understanding and to the teachers' identification toward the students' thinking level. Then, both PBL and PjBL models had still been relatively seldom to implement by the teachers. In general, teachers admitted that they often involved appropriate problems in within the PBL process. On the other hand, in relation to the PjBL, teachers' complaint had been the difficulty in selecting the appropriate project and time management. Such problems were caused by unpreparedness the teachers in the implementation process. The teachers had not completely gained an in-depth understanding toward the model.

One of the excuses that the teachers mostly stated within the process of adjusting themselves to the new curriculum had been the demand of completing the learning materials. This situation shows that there has been a focus toward the development of cognitive domain solely. It is very possible that the learning process which emphasizes the students' activeness might run very fast and even might encompass the wide and in-depth materials if the learning materials have been well-designed.

One of the skills that should be developed in 2013 Curriculum has been the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). The emphasis that the curriculum pursued was a response toward the demand of the century that encouraged the students to not only be able to explain and to implement theories but also to solve problems through analysis-, evaluation- and creation-level thinking. However, the data that had been found in the field showed that it had been rare that the elementary school teachers understood the HOTS.

One of the strategies to improve teachers' performance was exerting the principal's role. The data that had been found in the field showed that an elementary school which principal had been attentive had good administration and more professional teachers who implemented the learning process. Such principal might control the learning process implementation by means of correction toward the learning sets and their implementation. The school principal had a strategic role in performing a correction toward the suitability between the lesson plans and the curriculum and in providing multiple understandings that might be necessary for the teachers altogether in the same time.

3. Learning Facilities

Facilities had been another important factor within the implementation of learning process. The main facilities which presence had been anticipated were the student's books and the teacher's books. However, the distribution of 2013 Curriculum books had not been well implemented; as a result, many delays had been frequently found within the book distribution to the schools. Then, another problem was that occurred within the book distribution was the mismatch in the number of the books and that of the students. Therefore, most of the schools implemented a policy that one book should be used by two children who occupied one table, the teachers and the students to download the book files from the Internet and the downloaded book files might be turned into a matter of guidance for the learning process. Unfortunately, the library facilities in most of elementary schools had still been limited. The alternative to this situation would be suggesting the teachers to design a learning process that would be in accordance to the new curriculum independently and this would include the theme design.

Within the learning process in the classroom, in general there should be multiple supporting media. Typically, elementary schools had the fundamental display tools such as ruler, arc, calipers, globe, and map or tennis ball. However, not many schools had already possessed the other media

such as geometrical build model, human skeleton model, animal digestive system model, computer and Internet. In the case of media use, in general the teachers adjusted themselves to the situation of their schools. Many teachers admitted that they rarely involved the learning media due to the limited support provided by the school.

4. Assessment Implementation

The attitude assessment had been the one that most teachers complained about. For the attitude assessment, the teachers had not been able to design a good instrument from the formulation of conceptual definition through the formulation of operational definition until the indicator formulation and the instrument items. In general, the teachers directly viewed the instrument items without any appropriate stage; as a result, the process was perceived to be very difficult and the results of this process would be inclined to have bias. The second problem that had been related to assessment was the assessment process. Many teachers complained the abundant number of students and, as a consequence, the assessment process would be very difficult to conduct. The problem that appeared in cognitive assessment was the determination of test item composition in terms of both theme mastery and lesson mastery. For the remaining part, the teachers had been relatively familiar and had relatively understood the knowledge assessment process.

The difficulty that the teachers encountered in the skills assessment was the one in designing the assessment rubric. The description design that became the guidelines in assessment gradation was considered to be the most difficult process. The rubric that had not been well designed caused the teachers to have difficulties in maintaining the assessment objectives. The absence of good rubric might also cause the assessment that the teachers performed to be leaving the test item indicators. This result supported the previous research by Retnawati, Hadi, & Nugraha (2016) that teachers had difficulty in developing the instrument of attitude, formulating the indicators, and designing the assessment rubric.

The final stage within the assessment process was the school report card writing. Basically, the score in 2013 Curriculum contained the achievement of student's competency so that the students would not only focus on comparing their achievement to that of their peers but would also focus on comparing their own achievement in order to master all competencies. The scores were displayed in a description of achievement and such description was considered difficult by the teachers. The teachers had not been accustomed to writing such description; as a result, this process had been complained by the teachers.

Conclusions

The greatest challenge in the curriculum process has been the teachers' negative stigma. Multiple massive efforts that have been taken by the government in socializing the new curriculum have provided positive impacts. However, the fact that the researchers have found that many teachers have not completely understood 2013 Curriculum. The reason is that these teachers are physically confused, the teachers are afraid and the teachers do not open themselves toward the change; as a consequence, the efforts to understand the new curriculum independently and collectively have not appeared in maximum. The implementation of elementary school learning process in accordance to the 2013 Curriculum has not been fully conducted due to the teachers' multiple difficulties. These difficulties include the process implementation according to the curriculum and the learning contents that have not developed the HOTS. The learning facilities availability in the form of learning sources and learning media have still been limited; as a result, the teachers are demanded to be creative so that the learning process might be conducted well in accordance to the curriculum's mandate. The problems that have been found in the assessment stage are the teachers' capacity in selecting the appropriate technique, in designing the good instrument and in designing a clear assessment description.

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