ANALYSIS OF THE 2014 JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH NATIONAL EXAMS BASED ON THE MICRO- AND MACRO-SKILLS ASSESSED

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Abstract

In the past few years, there have been controversial issues regarding the national exams vis-à-vis its legal use as a part of graduation decision, the administration, and the result. The history of the national exam of the elementary and the secondary schools dates back from the late 1960s. Changes of government's policies concerning the implementation of the national exam and the use of the result should be understood as an effort of the betterment of the education system in Indonesia.

Philosophically, the national exam should have the most important characteristics of a test: the validity and accountability. The Ministry of Education and Culture has stipulated that the development and the use of the English National Exam for the junior high school is made in such a way to measure the communicative skill at the functional level in the daily communication which is in line with the goals of the English teaching as contained in framework of the National Examination or Kisi-Kisi Ujian Nasional SMP.

This English National Exam consists of 50 multiple choice items covering 45 reading comprehension questions, 3 items of grammar, and 2 items to measure writing skills. As the most items focus on reading comprehension questions, this paper presents the analysis of the questions based on the micro- and macro skills proposed by Brown (2004). The result shows that the levels of the questions tend to be more to measure the macro-skills of reading.

As both types of skills are grouped hierarchically, the higher levels of the skills require the manipulation of the lower skills. It is most important for the English teachers to consider this concept when preparing lesson, doing the class activities, especially when guiding students to comprehend texts.

Keywords: the English National Exam, reading comprehension, micro- and macro-skills

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Introduction

The history of the national exam of the elementary and the secondary schools dates back from the late 1960s. The implementations of the national exams have been evaluated every year since then resulting in the changes of the government policies concerning the use, the structures, and the development for the betterment of the national exams. In the past decade, there have also been changes of the curriculum of the elementary and secondary schools as a result of the evaluation of the implementation of the existing curriculum. Along with the government's policies that the national exams should be implemented to ensure the accountability of the teaching and learning process at schools, the content of the national exams should have always represented what and how materials should be delivered to the students in these diverse qualities of the schools all over Indonesia. Hence, national exams are high-stake exams from which important decisions will be made.

In the past few years, there have been controversial issues regarding the national exams vis-à-vis its legal use as a part of graduation decision, the administration, and the result. As a high-stakes assessment, the national exam should bear the aspects of consequential validity (Brown, 2004), i.e.: the effect of test preparation courses and manuals on performance. McNamara (in Brown, 2004) states his worries about test results that may reflect socioeconomic conditions such as opportunities for coaching that are made available by only some families. When such a condition happens, there is always a question on the consequential validity of the test.

One of the exams included in the National Exams for the Junior High School students is the English National Exam. To be able to function as high-stake exams, the English national exams have been developed based on a carefully prepared table of specifications issued by the National Educational Standard Institution. Based on the principle of maintaining the content validity and accountability of a test, a test should also have positive backwash effect, in this case, in eliciting the pictures of learning process and results. Within the principles of learning a foreign language, Brown (2004) proposes a crucial consideration concerning micro- and macro-skills of all the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Scrutinizing the micro- and macro-skills of each language skill is important to represent the spectrum of possibilities for objectives in the assessment of the four language skills. Based on this concept about testing language skills, the writer conducted a study on the spectrum of the English National Exam. Hence, this paper reports the result of the study applying the content analysis method conducted on the micro skills and macro skills assessed in the 2014 English National Exam for the Junior High School students.

The goal of the English Teaching at the Junior High School

The curriculum of the Junior High School admits that English is a communication tool. Communication involves comprehending and expressing information, thoughts, feelings, and communicating the development of knowledge, technology, and culture. The goal of teaching English in Junior High School level is to develop the communicative skill at the functional level in the daily communication. The teaching and learning materials involve the spoken and written discourse: short functional texts, monologs, and various text genres: procedure, descriptive, recount, narrative, and report. To support the goal, the learning materials include the linguistic competence (grammar, vocabulary, phonology) relevant to the three language competences: the linguistic competence, socio-cultural competence, and strategic competence (Nunan, 2003).

The 2014 English National Exam for the Junior High School: A Standardized Test

English as one of the subjects in the Junior High School curriculum is considered important to be mastered by the students; and therefore, it has become one of the national exams students must take. As it is used to measure students' achievement of a lesson, it is a criterion-referenced test (Brown, 2005, measuring the goal of teaching and learning English and the materials students have learned in one level of education, in this case: the Junior High School. In order to serve the purpose of the test, the test content should be relevant to the learning materials (*Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia nomor 3 tahun 2013*). The main focus of teaching English at the Junior High School is the four language skills, and the national exam focuses on assessing reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary relevant to the basic competences stated in the curriculum.

The National Education System Law 2003 (*Undang-Undang Sistem Pendidikan National 2003)* stipulates that the national exam is included in the national education standard. The national exam is used as (1) the controlling and mapping tool, (2) determining student graduation from each level of education, and (3) basis for the quality improvement of the education in Indonesia. The Institute of National Standard Education (*Badan Standard National Pendidikan*) is in charge of developing the national exams. Based on the test blue print, parallel sets of the 2014 English National Exam for the Junior High Schools were developed. As parallel sets, these tests should have the same content and item formats. The Junior High School English exam focuses on reading comprehension. Each set has 15 texts of narrative, descriptive, letters/emails, and short functional texts followed by multiple-choice questions with 4 options. Two texts of the fifteen are used as completion texts. There are also 3 grammar items of making sentences from jumbled words and 2 items of arranging sentences into a paragraph. The later part is a writing test in

which students do not produce a written discourse but use their writing competence especially about paragraph format to arrange sentences into an appropriate paragraph.

Brown (2004) states: "Tests are prepared administrative procedures that occur at identifiable times in a curriculum when learners muster all their faculties to offer peak performance, knowing that their responses are being measured and evaluated." This philosophy of testing is the basis for developing and administering the national exam which is an essential component in the curriculum. This exam designed on specific course, i.e. the English lesson and the basic competences stated in the curriculum is also meant to give students feedback in the form of grades. As such, this test is a criterion-referenced test indicating the content of the behavioral repertory and the correspondence between what students do and the underlying continuum of achievement of the English lesson (Brown and Hudson, 2002). This means that the content of the 2014 English National Exam should represent the English learning materials specified in the basic competences set out by the government.

The Micro- and Macro-skills of reading

Based on the test blue print, the English National Exam focuses on measuring the reading skill, writing skill, grammar, and vocabulary. Brown (2004) stresses the importance of synthesizing the micro- and the macro-skills implied in the students' performance in measuring language skills. He quotes Richards assuring that using micro-skills and macro-skills concept in reading classes has proven useful in the domain of specifying learning objectives; and moreover, it can force test makers to carefully identify the objective of a test. Brown proposes seven micro-skills and seven macro-skills for assessing reading skill.

The micro-skills are the skills 'attending the smaller bits and chunks of language, in more of a bottom-up process,' and the macro-skills are the skills processing the larger elements involved in a top-down approach. The micro- and macro-skills of reading are presented in the following table:

Table 1: Micro- and Macroskills of Reading (Brown, 2004)

Microskills	
1	Discriminate among the distinctive graphemes and orthographic patterns of English
2	Retain chunks of language of different lengths in short-term memory.
3	Process writing at an efficient rate of speed to suit the purpose.
4	Recognize a core of words, and interpret word order patterns and their significance.
5	Recognize grammatical of word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.), systems (e.g., tense, agreement, pluralization), patterns, rules, and elliptical forms.

6	Recognize that a particular meaning may be expressed in different grammatical forms.
7	Recognize cohesive devices in written discourse and their role in signaling the relationship between and among clauses.
Macroskills	
8	Recognize the rhetorical forms of written discourse and their significance for interpretation
9	Recognize the communicative functions of written texts, according to form and purpose.
10	Infer context that is not explicit by using background knowledge
11	From described events, ideas, etc., infer links and connections between events, deduce causes and effects, and detect such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification.
12	Distinguish between literal and implied meanings.
13	Detect culturally specific references and interpret them in a context of the appropriate cultural schemata.
14	Develop and use a battery of reading strategies, such as scanning and skimming, detecting discourse markers, guessing the meaning of words from context, and activating schemata for the interpretation of texts.

The Exam Content

Seven sets of the test are analyzed in the study. The analysis was done by comparing the questions from all sets with Brown's micro- and macro-skills levels of reading to determine what skills were assessed in the questions. Firstly, the writers analyzed the test contents in terms of the texts genres, the question types, the number of items for each text, the existence of other items which are not reading tests, and the structure of each set of tests as a whole set of test. The result of the analysis shows that each set has 15 texts two of which are used as completion tests to test vocabulary and parts of speech. There are three grammar items testing sentence construction in the form of words arrangement. Two other items are indirect test of writing in which test takers have to arrange sentences into a good paragraph. The test structure representing all 7 sets is presented in the following table:

Table 2: The Content of the English National Exam

No	Text genre/material	Item Types	Number of items	Item numbers
1	narrative	Wh-questions	4	1 - 4
2	report	Wh-question	4	5 – 7, 9
		completion – restricted response	1	8
3	short functional text -	Wh-questions	1	10

	advertisement	Completion – restricted response	1	11
4	recount	Text completion: verb – noun - adverb	3	12 - 14
	Grammar test	word arrangement	3	15 - 17
	Writing test	sentence arrangement	2	18 -19
5	functional text – letter	wh-questions	3	20 – 21, 23
		completion – restricted response	1	22
6	short functional text – school program advertisement	completion – restricted response	2	24 - 25
7	short functional test – student program announcement	completion – restricted response	2	26, 28
		Wh-question	1	27
8	short functional text: schedule	Wh-questions	2	29 - 30
		Completion – restricted response	1	31
9	procedure	Wh-question	1	33
		Completion – restricted response	3	32, 34-35
10	descriptive	Wh-questions	2	36, 38
		Completion – restricted response	1	37
11	recount	Wh-questions	4	39 - 42
12	descriptive	text completion: adjective, verb, adverb	3	43 - 45
13	functional text: letter	Wh-questions	2	47 - 48
14	functional text: letter	Wh-questions	2	49 - 50

The Skills Assessed in the Exam

To analyze the reading skills assessed in the test, the writers used the list of micro- and macro skills as the parameters. It should be noted again that the seven sets of the tests have the same contents as they were

constructed based on one test blueprint. The result of the analysis is summarized in the following table:

Table 3: The Reading Skills Assessed

	MICROSKILLS							MACROSKILLS							TOTAL
Skill Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
Sum Of Each Skills Assessed	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	11	6	0	6	6	0	8	45
Percentage Of Each Skill	0	0	0	0	0	16	0	22	12	0	12	12	0	16	100%

The above table shows that micro-skills 1 until 5 and micro-skill 7 are not assessed in the exam, and neither macro-skills 10 and 13. One micro-skill which is micro-skill 6 is assessed, and 5 macro-skills: 8, 9, 11, 12, and 14 are assessed.

Micro-skill 6:

The result of the analysis shows that only one microskill – microskill number 6 – is assessed in the test (16 % of the total number of the reading questions). Microskill number six requires the students to recognize a particular meaning which may be expressed in different grammatical forms. This particular microskill is the reading skill at the word level (lexicon). There are 6 items of this types which are of text completion items (item numbers: 12 – 14, 43 – 45) asking students to choose an appropriate noun, adjective, verb, adverb to complete a text. In doing these items students need to use the immediate grammatical context to choose the appropriate word which is deleted from the text. Two items assessing this skill requires students to use the immediate context to recognize the synonyms of words (item numbers 31 and 35). Thus, at this stage, students have to apply their linguistic repertoire depending on the size and range of their vocabulary and all the different structures they can use.

The followings are the examples of questions for micro-skill 6 taken from each set:

Question number 31 of each set:

Set 1   :   *The underlined word is synonymous with ...*
Set 2   :   *"Leave for Denpasar" The underlined word is closest in meaning to the words ...*
Set 3   :   *"Watch the activities of local people at Kelayan river bank" The underlined word is similar in meaning with ...*
Set 4   :   *"This camping programme is supervised by ..." What does the underlined word mean?*
Set 5   :   (the same as the question of set 3 as it is for the same reading text)
Set 6   :   *"Journey by bamboo rafting to explore Meratus Mountain ..." The underlined word is synonymous with ...*
Set 7   :   (the same as the question of set 4 as it is for the same reading text)

Macro-skill 8:

The biggest percentage of the items assesses micro skill 8 (22%): recognizing the rhetorical forms of written discourse and their significance for interpretation. The questions require students to use their knowledge about rhetorical forms to make interpretation about meanings. At this level, students use their linguistic knowledge to effectively make prediction about meaning making use of the rhetorical situation of the sentences in the a paragraph or even the whole text .

The followings are the examples of questions for macro-skill 8 taken from each set:

Question number 30 of each set:

Set 1   : *What will they do on the last day of the tour?*
Set 2   : *What will the students do on Monday morning? They will ...*
Set 3   : *What do they do after checking-in at the hotel?*
Set 4   : *What will they do if there's a bad weather?*
Set 5   : (the same as the question of set 3 as it is for the same reading text)
Set 6   : (the same as the question of set 1 as it is for the same reading text)
Set 7   : (the same as the question of set 4 as it is for the same reading text)

Macro-skill 9:

This macro-skill of reading requires students to recognize the communicative functions of written texts, according to form and purpose. The example of the question of this level is question number 9 of each set which is a question for texts 2. The texts for sets 1 and 2 are the same, the texts for sets 3 and 4 are of the title, the texts for set 5 and 6 are the same; thus, altogether there are 4 text titles for the 7 sets of tests. The question is: *What is the purpose of the text?* (question no 9).

Macro-skill 11:

This macro-skill of reading requires students to deduce infer links and connections between events, deduce causes and effects, and detect such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification, from described events, ideas, etc.

The followings are the examples of questions for macro-skill 11 taken from each set:

Question number 22 of text 5 of each set:

Set 1   : The writer wanted to see sunrise in Bromo because …
Set 2   : Why did Nuri's sister invite her to Jakarta?
Set 3   : Why was Widia happy to spend her holiday at Ranau Lake?
Set 4   : (the same as the question of set 2 as it is for the same reading text)
Set 5   : Sandy and his family spent the holiday in the countryside because …

Set 6   : (the same as the question of set 1 as it is for the same reading text)

Set 7   : (the same as the question of set 5 as it is for the same reading text)

Macro-skill 12:

This macro-skill requires students to distinguish between literal and implied meanings. At this stage of reading process, students infer meanings which are not stated literary in the texts. In order to get the implied meaning, students have to make inferences or predictions of any idea which is not directly stated in words. This skill is of a higher level of reading comprehension in which students should make use of both their linguistic knowledge and necessary background knowledge on the topic discussed in the text.

The followings are the examples of questions for macro-skill 12 taken from each set:

Question number 42 of each set which is taken from text 11 of each set:

Set 1   : *Why didn't Grace move from her cage to welcome Ryan's mother and sister?*

Set 2   : *Based on the text, we know that ...*

Set 3   : *What did the writer do last week?*

Set 4   : *From the text, we know that the river ...*

Set 5   : *What does the writer do with Scruffy in his spare time?*

Set 6   : *What were the family doing under the tree? They were ...*

Set 7   : *What activity does the writer do after school with his pet?*

Macro-skill 14:

At this stage of the reading process, students have to use a battery of reading strategies, such as scanning and skimming, detecting discourse markers, guessing the meaning of words from context, and activating schemata for the interpretation of texts.

The followings are the examples of questions for macro-skill 14 which mainly ask about the message of text 1 of each set:

Set 1   : What can we learn from paragraphs 1 and 2?

Set 2   : What can we learn from the story?

Set 3   : What can we learn from the story?

Set 4   : What can we learn from the story?

Set 5   : From the story, we can learn that you …

Set 6   : What can we learn from the story above? We must …

Set 7   : What can we learn from the story?

The Implication for the Teaching and Learning Program

The concept of considering micro-skills and macro-skills of reading comprehension proposed by Brown (2004) represents the importance of synthesizing both skills implied in the students' performance in the reading classes and in measuring reading skills. Both

types of skills have been proven to be useful guide for specifying learning objectives; and henceforth, they will be the basis for developing the achievement indicators of reading comprehension.

The discussion about measuring students' achievement has always resulted in crucial and intriguing arguments among teachers of English, especially when the issue is about a high-stake test like the national exam. English teachers may find it confusing to differentiate between two important class activities: either helping students to comprehend texts or training them just to answer reading questions, sometimes without even understanding the texts.

The result of the analysis on the micro- and macro-skills of the reading comprehension part of the National Exam for the junior high school shows that more questions of the macro-skills are included in the test. This is not to argue that the class activities should focus only on the skills assessed in the exam. As both types of skills show a hierarchical order of the skills to be used in the process of reading, starting with the lowest level of a reading process that is the analysis of the smallest units of a text, i.e.: discriminating among the distinctive graphemes and orthographic patterns of a text, and going up to the highest level of the skills, i.e.: developing and using a battery of reading strategies, such as scanning and skimming, detecting discourse markers, guessing the meaning of words from context, and activating schemata for the interpretation of texts, an English teachers should be aware that each skill in both types should be considered in classroom activities.

Meanwhile, the absence of micro-skills 1 to 5 in the national exam doesn't mean that these skills are not important for helping students comprehend texts, but these 5 micro-skills are the ladders to reach the higher levels of all the skills. Therefore, training students these skills are of the same importance as training students the higher levels of skills. The ability of manipulating the skills of the lower level is the basis for proceeding to the higher level in the reading process. This is to say that training students to be able to make use of both skills as needed in the process of reading comprehension activities in the classroom should receive careful consideration by the teacher. Guiding students to be able to use the lowest level of the skills when students need them will help them to reach the higher levels.

In conclusion, it should be noted that answering questions of the higher level requires the manipulation of the skills in the lower levels. On the other hand, the national exam, as a high-stake test, cannot and does not have to, in the real practice of test development, include questions asking all levels in both types of skills due to the fact that any test always undergoes limitations of time, length of the test, considerations about test takers being fatigue in doing a test, and other test constraints.

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