

A CURRENT ISSUE ON ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) IN INDONESIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS.

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ABSTRACT

English should be a compulsory subject in Indonesian primary schools for some main reasons. Firstly, they are in their golden age for learning any language. It is also supported by age factor which assumes that before puberty children have a “brain plasticity” maximizing their language learning. Next, time factor proves that learning English earlier results in more language exposures which lead to higher English proficiency. Being compulsory from primary school provides more opportunities for the students to practice the language from both peers and teachers’ interactions. This learning optimality is also supported by strong affective factors in young learners such as curiosity, self-confidence, risk-taking and low pressure significant in second language acquisition. Another reason is that more benefits are waiting for those starting learning English as foreign language in primary schools including benefit on cognitive and social competence, first language development and access of English. Therefore, revision on the recent Indonesian curriculum which put English as an extracurricular one is highly recommended to ensure the effectiveness of the teaching English to the development of English proficiency among Indonesian EFL learners.

Key Word: *English, Foreign Language, and Indonesian Primary Schools*

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of English to primary schools’ curricula has been recognized and applied by many countries. Developed countries such as Japan, South Korea, China, France, Netherlands as well as developing countries such as Vietnam and Serbia start teaching English from primary schools (Zein, 2015). In Indonesia both the government and the people realize the importance of English, but the question on when the students should formally start learning English is still debatable. Previously, the implementation of the policy of introducing English as a local content for primary school pupils since 1993 has allowed more Indonesian younger students to learn English. This policy was based on public aspiration for providing a strong foundation of English for their children in order to face the globalization era. However, in 2013 the government released a new curriculum called *Kurikulum 2013* in which the government places English only as an elective subject in primary schools (Karli, 2014). According to Sahiruddin (2013) while English lessons have been compulsory in secondary schools, the recent Curriculum has revised the status of learning English in Primary schools from local content subject to an extra-curricular one. The implication of this policy is that English is an optional subject and should be given outside school hours. This current curriculum has been argued by many linguists,

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practitioners and parents as they believe that English should be a compulsory subject from primary schools for the following reasons.

DISCUSSION

There are some reasons why English should be a compulsory subject in Indonesia primary schools which is related to the aspect of linguistic properties and sociolinguistics aspects as follows.

Golden age

One of the main reasons is that primary school students are within their golden ages to learn any second or foreign language. This optimality is supported by three main factors namely age, time and affective factor. First of all, age is believed to be a determining variable in the success of second or foreign language acquisition (Johnson & Newport 1989, DeKeyser & Larson-Hall, 2005). Notions of age in second language acquisition has resulted in the solid belief that students have a capability to learn another language when they are young, the younger, the better as at this age children are developing and their brain is in its peak to learn any language. This belief is based on the study of Penfield & Roberts (1959) and later developed by Lenneberg (1967). Lenneberg assumed that there is a “neuroplasticity” or “brain plasticity” on children before puberty which enable them to attain full achievement of language acquisition which is widely known as a Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). The critical period which occurs before puberty leads to the success of language acquisition as the children will have an opportunity to acquire normal or native-like skills. Scovel (2000) assumed that in the first ten years, the “brain plasticity” is believed to play a significant role in supporting the success of the children in obtaining new languages and it becomes the uniqueness of younger learners which the adults do not have. In line with Scovel, Patkowski (1994) explained that a certain time occurs around puberty when it becomes difficult if not impossible for learners to acquire a natural second language acquisition especially in the area of pronunciation. This neurological advantage enables children to learn the language more naturally and once puberty arrives this ability will be lost and learners tend to rely more on learning skills and strategies.

Many experimental research on the comparison between children and other ages in second language learning have demonstrated that children perform better than other ages. For example, an empirical evidence supporting the concept of ‘the earlier, the better’ comes from a study of 1.000 Croatian students’ year 6-7 learning English, French, German and Italian in primary schools and the study was conducted in eight years. The project was aimed to find the optimal age for starting to learn the foreign language in the primary school curriculum and in collecting the data the researchers used varied instruments including classroom observations, oral interviews, recordings of story-telling, questionnaires, and English standardized proficiency tests. After eight years of foreign language exposures, it was concluded that children who had begun learned those foreign languages at age six and seven performed better on tests than children who started at age ten and eleven. Experimental group who started learning foreign language from six and seven significantly outperformed the control group starting from age ten and eleven in terms of pronunciation, orthography, vocabulary and English proficiency tests, but generally similar at reading. Similarly, for their oral skills, the younger Croatian EFL learners showed higher level of communicative competence than its counterpart (Djigunović & Vilke, 2000) as cited in (Nikolov & Djigunović, 2006).

Further evidence tending in the same direction comes from a study conducted by Johnson and Newport (1989). The researchers studied forty six native Koreans and Chinese speakers who migrated to United States between ages three and thirty nine. This study was aimed to examine the existence of critical period in second language acquisition and from 276 grammar tasks containing varieties of different sentences and rule types the researchers concluded that there is a positive correlation between the age and the result of acquisition. For example only subject aged 3- 7 can achieve language proficiency similar to the level of native speakers and one interesting finding is that their ability in language acquisition declined as they were getting older.

Furthermore, beside the age factor, time factor is also important to be concerned. The earlier students start learning a language, the more exposure they have leading to the successful of second or foreign language learning. The amount of target language exposures is the main variable in the success of SLA. Enever & Moon (2009) illustrated that when the learners spend longer time in learning in schools, the students will likely to have higher proficiency. Singleton & Ryan (2004) emphasized that the sooner the students start learning foreign languages, the more exposures that they will have which becomes one important factor of the success of foreign language learning. Similarly, Krashen (1988) stated that language exposure has become causative variable in success of second language acquisition. Therefore, starting from primary schools enables children to have an extended English exposures resulting in English language development. Unlike the ESL, the EFL context such as Indonesia, schools are the source of language input in which students have sufficient opportunities to practice. Thus, if Indonesian EFL learners start learning English from primary schools, before entering universities approximately 16 years of English exposure they have compared to only 10 years if they start from secondary schools. It is assumed that more English is heard and practiced by the students so that they can have more opportunities to develop their language skill. In contrast, when the government limits the learning hours or even diminish English subject in primary schools, the young learners will lose valuable opportunities to interact and have more quantities of language exposure especially from teachers and peers interactions.

Some empirical evidences have supported the importance of language exposure in second and foreign language acquisition. For example, Briere (1978), by observing Native Mexican children who were learning Spanish as a second language, found that environmental variables including amount of target language exposure that students obtain at schools enhanced their proficiency in the target language. It was found that the students who had more language exposures scored the highest on the proficiency test of Spanish. Another study is from Hamayan et al. (1977) who studied the impact of students' personality and language exposure on their achievement in learning French as a second language. The researcher compared the students who had French instruction in most subject to the students who got French instruction only in French lesson. It was found that the first group of students having instruction in French in all subjects outperformed the other group who only had it in French class. It was concluded that the first had amount of French exposures from their interaction with their teachers and peers and their French high usage increased their French proficiency.

Socio Affective, Cognitive and Cultural Benefits

In their ages primary schools students have a very strong socio affective condition identical in the process of acquiring the first language. Curiosity, self-confidence, lower anxiety, and risk taking are generally found among young learners. Krashen (1998) in his affective filter hypothesis stated that the psychological conditions of the learners such as their level of anxiety, motivation, self-esteem and risk taking should be the main considerations in second language acquisition. Further, Krashen asserted that one factor in the success of first language acquisition among children is that the ability to take benefit from their affective condition such lower anxiety, high motivation and risk-taking to use the target language. Operating the process of first language acquisition to their second language acquisition process, children learn second languages much more quickly and efficiently than adolescents and adults do. These affective factors can maximize the language exposures effectively for the earlier starters while the latter starter should struggle and do more extra work before they can use the target language. For example, children in primary schools have high curiosity and this drives young learners to mimic pronunciation naturally and this will be harder for older learners. Their sensitive hearing helps them pick up on and duplicate sounds as when the children hear new word, they just want to directly practice them. Also, affective factors such as high anxiety is hardly found among primary schools students as the age of primary school student is very fresh and they have a low psychological pressure such as from their home and their environment, so the structure of the foreign language can easily be copied in their minds. Krashen (1988) stated that when there is high pressure on learners, the comprehensible input which is the main requirement of second language acquisition will not be obtained.

In addition, learning English as a foreign language in primary schools provides many benefits in terms of cognitive and social competences, first language development and access of English. Firstly, learning a foreign language in early childhood results in certain cognitive and socio affective advantages. Foreign language learning in children develops their critical thinking, creativity, and mind flexibility (Abbott, 2007 & Lee, 1996). Hakuta (1986) emphasized that by learning second language, learners will have greater “cognitive flexibility, better problem solving and higher order thinking skills” (p.34). Studies have shown that foreign language learning increases critical thinking skills and creativity among young children and in many cases children learning foreign languages have greater cognitive skills over children who do not learn any. For instance, students who are learning a foreign language surprisingly performed better in math test especially in the area of problem solving. It implies that when children learn a foreign language, besides developing their linguistic skill, they also develop their cognitive skill. Much empirical research has confirmed this notion. Lopato (1963) conducted study on 114 of third grade elementary school students in New York. The researcher compared the experimental group who received 15 minutes of Spanish as a foreign language lesson to the control group who did not have any Spanish lesson. It was found that from The Stanford Achievement Test, the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group in Math, but only slightly higher in reading and oral language test. It was concluded that the experimental group of students were able to think abstractly and developed their cognition on problem solving needed in doing math tasks. This research justifies the notion that when children learn a foreign language they indirectly develop their cognitive skills which can be transferred to the math skill.

Besides, social competences such as tolerance and cultural understanding are found in early foreign language learners (Sharpe, 1992) as cited in (Sharpe & Driscoll, n.d). Learning foreign languages in young ages open students' mind that beside their language there is another language spoken by many people. This awareness result in self-development as it teaches children to be open minded which is very important in social interaction. Research conducted by Curtain & Pesola (1988) showed that learning a language helps the younger learners to be more aware of the existence of other cultures since they are still very open-minded and they have a positive judgment to others who have a different culture from theirs. In other words, learning foreign language like English promotes intercultural awareness for students because language and culture are intimately related. Cummins (1998) stated that children who develop skill in two different languages in schools are likely to have higher social intelegence helping them to create a good relationship.

Positive Impact on Students' First Language Development

Learning English in primary schools contributed to the development of students' first language. The Indonesian government might argue that learning foreign languages such as English n early ages gives negative impact on students' learning Bahasa Indonesia. In 2012 the government through Constitutional Court (*Mahkamah Konstitusi*) banned international stardardized schools which encourage the students to use English in learning instruction. Besides the equality in education, *Mahkamah Konstitusi* stated that the students should focus on learning Indonesian before they learn other languages (Indonesian Constiitutional Court, 2012). However, positive impacts can be gained from learning two languages simultaneously asevery language is acquired similiarly and they generally share the same patterns and structures. Much linguistic universality is widely found on languages including word formations, morphological signs, negation and question forms (Marastos, 1988) as cited in (Brown, 2007). As the students of primary schools are still developing their first language especially in the area of grammar, they generally compare their first language with the foreign language they are learning and understand the similarities and the differences. In some cases, many student obtain the full understanding about the structure of their first language after they learn second languages, so it can be said that there is always an interrraction between first and the second languagein which students actively transfer the linguistics skill from one language to another language. Curtain & Dahlberg (2004) asserted that learning foreign languages develops learners' understanding on structure and vocabulary (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004)

Much empirical research has supported the positive correlation between first and second language learning. For example, Hussien (2014) conducted a study on 83 primary schools students in Egypt (45 bilinguals and 38 monolinguals). The students were tested with reading and spelling task developed by the author and the result showed the bilingual students have higher proficiency in reading and spelling of Arabic compared to the monolingual students. Therefore, the researcher concluded that learning English as a second language resulted in a positive impact on the students' accuracy in Arabic as their first language. More systematic and longer study aimed to explore the relationship between first and second language learning was conducted by Brouwer & Bot (2010). Participants were first and second grade of Dutch primary schools students receiving between one and three hours of English lesson per week. After five years, from 2003 to 2008, it was

concluded that learning English did not give negative influences to the students' first language development.

Access of English

Being a compulsory subject provides an equal access of English for all Indonesian EFL learners. Sahiruddin (2013) stated the change of status of English in the newest curriculum will influence the access of English among learners. The position of English as the international language widely used in business and education has encouraged parents to provide this language skill for their children. When the government places English as an extracurricular one which indirectly reduces the learning hours of English, this will be contradictive with parent's expectation. Therefore, when the parents find that schools does not provide a good access of English to their children, they will search alternative institutions such English courses or private courses which are costly. Nikolov and Djigunovic (2006) described that "learners' socioeconomic status and parental support are rarely addressed explicitly, although in contexts where the private sector offers early programs socio economically advantaged children's parents are more able to afford them" (p.245). The implication is that the student who come from low economic status will have a difficulty to obtain enough access of English and they will only rely on English lesson provided by schools which is very limited.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, English should be a compulsory subject in Indonesian primary schools for some main reasons. Firstly, they are in their golden age for learning any language. It is also supported by age factor which assumes that before puberty children have a "brain plasticity" maximizing their language learning. Next, time factor proves that learning English earlier results in more language exposures which lead to higher English proficiency. Being compulsory from primary school provides more opportunities for the students to practice the language from both peers and teachers' interactions. This learning optimality is also supported by strong affective factors in young learners such as curiosity, self-confidence, risk-taking and low pressure significant in second language acquisition. Another reason is that more benefits are waiting for those starting learning English as foreign language in primary schools including benefit on cognitive and social competence, first language development and access of English. Therefore, revision on the recent Indonesian curriculum which put English as an extracurricular one is highly recommended to ensure the effectiveness of the teaching English to the development of English proficiency among Indonesian EFL learners.

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