REINTRODUCING THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING ENGLISH AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN INDONESIA

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Abstract:
There has been a long debate about children learning a foreign or second language (SL) at an early age. Some claim that learning a foreign language (FL) can burden children who are still struggling in mastering their native language (NL). In case of Indonesian context, English has been excluded from the 2013 curriculum. Arguments supporting the elimination seem baseless and worth revising. Considering the benefits of learning English which outweigh the drawbacks in terms of improving the quality of the next generation, Indonesian government should recommend English to be taught in elementary schools. Some important points regarding human or teachers and teaching resources need to be taken into account further.

Keywords: *Teaching English, Primary School*

It is inevitable that the need to master a foreign language has been rising these days and is predicted to continue growing in the near future (Doye & Hurrell, 1997). One among the popular foreign languages is English which has been regarded as an international language which is widely spoken in many parts of the world. As a communication tool, English is taught in many countries as a compulsory subject from basic education to tertiary level. Yet, among ASEAN countries, Indonesia is the only one which excludes English

from the elementary school curriculum (Kirkpatrick, 2016).

There has been a long debate about children learning a foreign or second language (SL) at an early age. Some claim that learning a foreign language (FL) can burden children who are still struggling in mastering their native language (NL). Furthermore, nationalism and cultural discrepancy are also claimed to have negative impact on learning a new language for children. However, others believe that it is advantageous for young learners to learn a foreign language. Children can benefit from their critical period before puberty which scientists agree as the best age to acquire a new language. These researchers further argue that learning FL does not harm the process of learning NL.

Concerning children can benefit from learning an FL or SL when they are still young, this essay criticizes the policy of banning English at primary schools and recommends that English should be reintroduced as a compulsory subject in primary schools, starting at grade 4. Yet, English teaching quality need to be taken into consideration. This essay will first explain the implications of banning English in the Primary school curriculum. Then, the advantages and some views against children learning English as an FL will be discussed, including children's nationalism, cultural discrepancy, first language preference, and limitation on human and material resources. Next, some recommendations are suggested to improve the quality of the implementation of the English language teaching in Indonesia.

ENGLISH IN THE 2013 CURRICULUM

Indonesia has just renewed its curriculum called the 2013 curriculum. In this curriculum the Indonesian government is banning English teaching in primary schools (Agustien, 2014). This new policy is different from the previous one, the 2006 curriculum or school-based curriculum, when English was allowed to be taught as a local content or an additional material for elementary school students, particularly years 4 to 6. Nevertheless, the policy restriction on English in primary schools can lead to three disadvantages

faced by young learners and also English teachers. Firstly, this policy could strongly deprive students from their innate potential age (Agustien, 2014). Gordon (2007) contends that brain mapping research suggests the age of 6 to puberty is the sensitive period or favorable age to attain new languages and the ability decreases significantly afterwards. In this period, children brain is also believed to be flexible 'uniquely' to acquire a language (Doye & Hurrell, 1997). Moreover, postponing learning a new language is likely to result in lack of completeness in mastering the language called as fossilization (Gordon, 2007; Verial). Additionally, Doye and Hurrell (1997) further argue that research has proven that mastering more than one language assists NL growth not as a disruption.

Secondly, banning English in elementary schools can widen the gap between children from rich and poor families (Agustien, 2014). Agustien (2014) argues that while poor children can just accept the policy for not learning English at school as they are not able to afford paying private English institutions, the rich children might enjoy learning English in other countries on holiday or being taught at home by special teachers paid by their parents. This distinction could later form a new problem when children from both distinct family financial backgrounds enroll in Junior high schools with different experience in learning English. The third problem of excluding English in primary schools is related to English teachers or the candidates of English teachers. Without English to teach at schools the teachers who receive certification incentives may be in trouble for not being able to provide sufficient teaching hours, otherwise they have to teach other subjects instead. This can be one reason why English teachers who joined PLPG (training for certified teachers) in a region in Indonesia disagreed with the removal of English from the primary school curriculum, even though it was said to be another extracurricular material (Arif, 2015). Meanwhile, for university students who are majoring in the English education department, banning English in one school level will probably reduce their employment opportunities once they graduate.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH FOR CHILDREN

Bearing in mind the disadvantages of the 2013 curriculum reform above, it is essential to discuss the views on whether children can actually benefit from learning English at primary schools or not. The main reason for banning the teaching of English in Indonesian primary schools is that educators are worried about its influence on national language, Bahasa Indonesia and nationalism (Agustien, 2014). Lauder (2008) also claims that acquiring a foreign language may reduce children national identity. Educators are anxious that children would prefer to master English or other foreign languages rather than their mother tongue as if they prefer English, this could lead to a decline in patriotism (Lauder, 2008). However, this argument seems to be exaggerated as elementary school children, especially those who are four to six graders, should have learnt Indonesian language from an early age through previous schooling in kindergarten and first to third years of elementary school and also through media and daily communication. Having such experience, 7 to 12 year-old children should be well literate in Bahasa Indonesia and be proud of being Indonesian.

The second view opposing learning English for young children is that children can be trapped in a cultural discrepancy (Verial). Since learning a language includes understanding the culture, children may probably be confused to identify their identity in their later life. Nonetheless, knowing other cultures may enrich children's experience and allow them to adapt easily to people from other countries, especially from neighboring ASEAN countries. Thus, children who have learnt English are highly likely to appreciate others who are different from them assuming that their experiences of learning are positive. Moreover, with the increasing emphasis on teaching English as an international language (EIL), the teaching should not just focus on the culture of English speaking countries called 'inner circle' such as America, England and Australia (Lauder, 2008), but local culture can also be included in the teaching and learning of English. Thus, learning English

can equip children with knowledge on cultural diversity.

The third dispute on teaching English for primary school students centers on the government's preference for developing the first language. The national education ministry argues that children should improve their characters and ought to learn just core subjects i.e. Math, Science and Indonesian language (Whitehead, 2013). Furthermore, they would not have sufficient chance to master Bahasa Indonesia early; therefore they should not need to learn English which may overload them cognitively and hinder their native language learning, and be barrier for them to learn their NL. However, learning more than one language can challenge children's cognitive skills, for instance by thinking about the grammar rules of English, and deepening their concentration skills, by learning to switch from NL to FL, which then seem to assist them to be better in other subjects (Verial). Hence, English can be as useful as other main subjects in primary schools.

The next argument in favor of English exclusion is the claim of inadequate capability of human resources and materials in facilitating the successful teaching of English to children in Indonesia (Whitehead, 2013). Whitehead (2013), moreover, states that the limited resources should be allocated for other important areas since the purpose of teaching English is considered to be absent in educational significance but as one form of newness and change. Conversely, teaching English to young learners is not just a matter of modernism, but facilitates young generations to access more knowledge which is available in English (Agustien, 2014). Many books are written in English, even most computers and the internet use English as the medium of communication. Therefore, it should be worth spending the budget for education on improving the quality of the next generation. Furthermore, the failure of teaching English for some students is not merely due to an early learning and it can be overcome by taking into consideration the recommendations suggested in the following paragraph below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To overcome the weaknesses of previous English language teaching in primary schools in Indonesia, several measures for improvements are needed, particularly those related to teachers and teaching resources. First, for teachers' upgrading, the government should provide more training on teaching English for young learners (TEYL) pedagogy (Zein, 2015). This training program can even be more useful for not only English teachers but also English teacher educators or the people who train the teachers or trainers. According to Zein (2015) the factor in successful training for teachers is only if the English teacher educators are aware of everyday challenges met by the English teachers in their classroom. This kind of TEYL certification is also needed by English department graduates who want to teach in primary schools who seem to not emphasize TEYL during their study. Thus, both experienced teachers and future teachers should not ignore the specialty of TEYL.

Furthermore, Musthafa (2010) proposes five bases as the requirement for successful TEYL teachers whom he argues have been considered to not be required to be as proficient teachers as those who teach higher education. The five principles for 'accomplished teachers of English' are to be familiar with and understand the answers to the following five questions: who are children? How do they learn? How do they learn a language? How do they learn a foreign language? And, how can teachers facilitate children learning English as a foreign language? (Musthafa, 2010, p. 120). By understanding the characteristics of the students as children and as special language learners, teachers could possibly choose more appropriate methods and techniques for teaching. Information on students' background and learning style preference will likely give better chance for teachers to lead their students' success in learning English.

In terms of teaching resources development, the review on the appropriateness of the materials to the students' age needs to be revisited. Young learners should be able to enjoy the learning process (Panggabean,

2015). Thus, Panggabean (2015) believes that TEYL should not only focus on norm or grammar, but should pay more attention to the use of language for communication. The materials of teaching can be incorporated within the syllabus, and Bourke (2006) encourages the use of topic-based syllabus as an example of suitable one for children learning a new language. He further argues that due to young learners' being in actively involved in learning using a topic-based syllabus which promises comfortable and supportive learning, children are highly likely to learn at their optimal performance (Bourke, 2006). Therefore, the more appropriate materials young students learn, the better results they seem to achieve.

CONCLUSION

Considering the importance of learning a foreign language for young learners, especially English, the Indonesian government should not withdraw children from their greatest opportunity in learning foreign languages during their critical period. In addition, as part of global society, learning English is an educational right children should possess. Being the only ASEAN country that does not include English in its primary school curriculum (Kirkpatrick, 2016), Indonesian children may be left behind compared to their counterparts from other countries. However, the government also needs to take into account the consideration on improving the quality of teaching for young learners in Indonesia by upgrading the quality of English educators who usually train English teachers (Zein, 2015). Consequently, this may likely to result in the chance for teachers to be inspired by their educators. Moreover, the elimination of English from primary schools is inappropriate since the teaching and learning of English for children would possibly bring more benefits than giving extra workload. Yet, this can only occur if English is appropriately approached by using suitable materials (Panggabean, 2015). Therefore, well-designed teaching resources and well-trained teachers could contribute to a successful TEYL in Indonesia.

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