

THE REMOVAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN CURRICULUM 2013

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Abstract

The Ministry of Education and Culture surprisingly wanted all primary schools to remove English, which has been taught for nearly 14 years in primary schools. It is the responsibility of governments, experts, and the media to educate stakeholders, to ensure that Indonesian children receive the best possible education. TEFLIN (the Association of Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Indonesia) recommends that English (a) is a local component for schools that have qualified human resources and adequate capacity, (b) is an extra-curricular for schools which have limited human resources and capacity, and (c) should not be taught in elementary school that does not have the human resources and capacity at all. The best choice of the three options above is to enforce English in elementary school as a local content so that certified English teachers in elementary school will not lose their jobs and high public interest toward English language will be accommodated.

Keywords: Cognitive Aspect, Interaction, Cooperative Learning

A. Introduction

Previous Minister of Education and Culture of Indonesia, Muhammad Nuh took a new regulation to repair Indonesia's educational quality through a new curriculum. There has been ongoing debate in Indonesia for three about the new curriculum 2013. Indonesian primary school students and teachers returned to school in January knowing that this would be the last semester following their current curriculum. Under guidelines prepared by the national education ministry, the new academic year beginning in July will herald a slimmed down curriculum covering just six subjects – Indonesian language, mathematics, religion, nationalism, art, and sports – with other content such as science taught thematically across the curriculum.

One significant innovation made by many primary schools in Indonesia in recent years has been the introduction of English as a subject for pupils in the lower elementary curriculum. English is offered at the lower primary level to get younger pupils to be interested in a foreign language besides their national language, Bahasa Indonesia, earlier. Previously pupils would have had to wait until they reached junior high school to study English.

However, not only English, but also science and social studies subjects should be removed, in favor of lessons on religion, nationalism and *Bahasa Indonesia* from the next school year beginning in July. The curriculum that is being revamped will offer English as a subject only from junior high school level. Many parents are finding the removal of science and English from the primary school curriculum baffling while critics see it as just another hurdle being placed on the citizens' path to better prosperity in the future.

B. Discussion

This article will discuss further about English education in Indonesia, pros and cons of teaching English at elementary level in curriculum 2013, how long it takes for children to learn English, global competition, and the need to integrate character building in curriculum.

1. English Language Education in Indonesia

In Indonesia educational system, English instruction begins in secondary (high) schools. According to 1967 Decree of the Ministry of Education and Culture (now known as the Department of National Education), the role of English in high schools was “to speed up national development in addition to establishing relationship with other nations and to carrying out its national foreign policy” (Nur, 2004: 179). Therefore, English is compulsory subject for these two levels. It is also one of the subjects that students have to take in their final examinations.

Every junior high school students study English for 136 contact hours each year in which each contact hour equal with 45 minutes (Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Nur, 2004). By the end of the third year, students would have studied English for 408 contact hours on average. Hence, by the students complete their senior high school education; they would have studied English for more than 800 contact hours. As stated in 1967 Decree, the primary objective of English instruction in secondary schools was to provide a well-developed reading skills to facilitate transfer of science and technology knowledge because around 75% to 90% of scientific and technical textbooks and reference materials are still available only in English (Nur, 2004; Lowenberg, 1991) Speaking skills on the other hand, was given low priority because it was considered to be a luxury and

also it was assumed that such ability at high school level could endanger national identity (Nur, 2004).

Prior 1994, English was not compulsory at elementary level (primary school). Only after 1994 revised curriculum, Ministry of Education then has allowed elementary schools to include English as a subject for students of grade four, five, and six. However, it seems that only government primary schools in urban areas and private schools would have the staff to teach English. As a result, those primary or elementary schools in rural areas still do not offer English due to shortage of staff able to teach it. In addition, unlike the high school students, English at elementary level is for oral communication only. Thus, the order of emphasis is speaking, listening, reading and writing (Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Nur, 2004). English is taught for 60 to 90 minutes a week, depending on resources of individual school (Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Nur, 2004).

At the university level, students in non-language departments have to take English for two semesters and for two to three hours a week (Lowenberg, 1991, Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Nur 2004). Based on their explanations, since the goal of English at this level is to assist students to develop their reading ability relates to their fields of study, the kind of English taught is ESP (English for Specific Purposes). While for those majoring in English, the university curriculum is to develop both language skills and theoretical knowledge (Dardjowidjojo, 2000). He also adds that to obtain a bachelor degree, students should finish their study between 144 to 160 credit hours.

2. Pros and Cons of Teaching English at Elementary Level in Curriculum 2013

The issue of English teaching elimination in the curriculum for elementary school level (elementary / MI) is horrendous. The newest curriculum is planned to be implemented in the 2013-2014. The policy is also reducing the number of subjects at elementary level from eleven subjects into six subjects, namely religion, Bahasa Indonesia, Citizenship education, Mathematics, Art and Culture, as well as Physical Education and Health. However, this reduction in the new curriculum is approved for students grades 1-3 only, while grades 4-6 will still being discussed. According Musliar Kasim, Deputy Minister of Education and Culture, English subject is abolished for elementary students as it is to give time for the students in strengthening Bahasa Indonesia before studying foreign language (Kompas.com, 10.10.2012).

This is very surprising, English has been taught for nearly 14 years in primary schools since officially introduced in 1994. It is not easy to understand the policy given too much of the allocation State and local budgets in order to succeed English learning process at school level basis. The result of teaching English is not successful yet in elementary school level but it must be stopped (Okezone.com,10.10.2012).

An expert of socio-linguistics from Gajah Mada University, Kunjana Rahardi says that early English introduction has bad impact toward the acquisition of Bahasa Indonesia, especially children in grade 1-3 elementary school age. By Mastering native language, Bahasa Indonesia or regional language will help a child learns the second and third language (voaindonesia. com, 12.10.2012).

Responding to the pros and cons about the new policy, Musliar Kasim as Deputy Minister of Education and Culture clarifies that English for elementary schools has never been a compulsory subject. Therefore, there is no removal of English in new curriculum for primary schools. he added that English language is not going to be included in six compulsory subjects at the primary level in the new curriculum, because if English is taught by incompetent teachers, the result is not good for students. However, English as local content or additional lessons can still be done as long as the content given is not overloaded and it is acceptable for children (Kompas.com, 11.13.2012).

3. **How Long Does It Take for Children to Learn English?**

Some linguists believe that universal grammar and its interaction with the rest of the brain is the design mechanism that allows children to become fluent in any language during the first few years of life. In fact, childhood may be a critical period for the acquisition of language capabilities. Some scientists claim that if a person does not acquire any language before the teen-aged years, they will never do so in a functional sense. Children may also have a heightened ability, compared to adults, to learn second languages- especially in **natural settings**. Adults, however, may have some advantages in the conscious study of a second language in a classroom setting.

The early years are recognized as the foundation years for children's development. In particular, the first six years are crucial for young children in developing their first language and cultural identity, and it is during these early years that children build up their knowledge of the world around them.

For children from language backgrounds other than English, the language or languages of the home that have been used since birth are the basis for developing meaningful relationships and learning about **meaningful communication and interaction** (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000).

There is a commonly held belief that young children can learn to speak English in just a few months, unlike adults, who may take years. Research shows that this is not true; *young children learning English can take years to become as competent in English* as their peers whose first language is English.

It takes approximately *three to four years in school* for young children learning English to accumulate an English vocabulary size comparable to their English-speaking peers, and even longer for them to produce sentences free of grammatical errors.

It can take from *five to seven years in school* for young children learning English to master complex academic English skills, both spoken and written, that are the same as their peers who speak English as their first language.

This common misconception most likely comes from our low conversational expectations for children. When adults speak to young children, they often ask questions requiring *yes* or *no* answers, refer to things in the child's immediate environment and compensate for any communication problems. This means that a young child can know very little English and may still appear competent because she or he can easily guess how to respond.

For young children *interaction with adults* and other children is the key to the acquisition of language. For infants and toddlers their early interaction with

parents and caregivers provides the basis for communication and learning in both the first or home language and in the second language (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000).

The importance of links between home, and early childhood settings or school is widely recognized. Strong partnerships with parents are essential, if children learning English as a second language are to have positive outcomes in the early childhood setting.

Partnerships with parents are primarily about equity. In supporting families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, early childhood professionals take responsibility to ensure fairness and build dynamic relationships that create a sense of belonging for all.

In early contacts with a family, early childhood professionals learn as much as they can from parents about the home environment, languages spoken at home, other family members etc, important cultural and religious factors, food preferences, taboos and other cultural information that is relevant to building up a profile of the child, the family and the community.

In Indonesia EFL is learnt in the classroom where the main source of the language is a prescribed textbook taught by a teacher. In most such cases the language has no existence outside the classroom; it often ceases to exist as soon as the textbook is closed. This certainly reduces their opportunity to use the language for real communication. In addition, children may never encounter actual English use outside the classroom. Consequently, they may not see the direct relevance of learning English to their needs. It shows that the fear that teaching English would mean a loss

of opportunity to nurture a good “motherland-loving attitude” is not correct because Children learn languages well when they have early exposure. This is proven in studies. The exposure is only at school it makes no difference. Children see how to talk and how to write then they will copy as a model to talk and to write. That circle needs to be repeated so many times. Children do not learn simply by copying and repeating. Students of Elementary school do not speak English in their community. They are not exposed to English language. They use local language at home and Bahasa Indonesia at school.

Moreover the fall in the number of students in recent years who are passing their Bahasa Indonesia on high school matriculation is not because students were devoting too much time to learning English at the expense of Bahasa Indonesia. The low pass rate can be blamed on poor teaching standards. The solution is not removing English but giving more attention to improve teaching standard. Teacher’s competence and teaching method are also the factors that influence achievement in teaching Bahasa Indonesia.

4. Global Competition

Given the fact that learning English is vital for the preparation to face a global competition, all primary school students in all over the country share the same 'instrumental motivation' (For the discussion about the definition and types of motivation, see e.g. Dornyei, 2001). However, evaluating the current policy of the Indonesian government to remove English as a local content subject is not relevant with both the students and community needs. Based on the current practice, only a small percentage of primary schools students had the opportunity to learn English. The disadvantages for the others who do not have this

opportunity are huge, especially when they start the junior high school level where English becomes compulsory subject. For this reason, it is essential to consider English to become a compulsory subject in the primary schools in order to attain educational equality. Hence, despite a huge attention from the government to the students' interests as presented in current curriculum document, the students' motivation in learning English should be reconsidered. The discussion also shows an enormous gap between the curriculum in the document and in the reality. In this regard, it is crucial to combine both aspects in the development of curriculum. Therefore, a further revision of the current document should take into account these two aspects. I have very clear stance: English should be taught in elementary schools in Indonesia.

5. The Need to Integrate Character Building in Curriculum

It cannot be denied again, the quality of our young people is a reflection of the nation's future. A nation that fails to cultivate the younger generation – morality and capability-and have good morals will be the losers in the future of the nation. The developed countries of the world are very concerned about the continuation of their country's future. What does it mean economic progress, technological sophistication and military leadership over the world, while the younger generation so depraved, ignorant and cannot be expected in the future.

The need to integrate character building in curriculum is obligation. Indonesian generation is facing big problem of moral degradation. Indonesian young people are facing challenges of drugs, narcotics, and psycho-tropics abuses, pornography, HIV/AIDS,

and violence. Number of narcotics and psycho-tropics abuse is relatively high. Data shows that in 2008 alone there are 19,791 cases of narcotics and psycho-tropics abuse (BNN, 2009). It is also worrying that Indonesia is in the fifth rank of the highest internet access with “sex” as the keyword (Okezone.com, 12 October 2011). Even though Indonesia has already had a regulation on pornography, the implementation of this regulation is still lacking and challenging. Children can easily access restricted sites through their hand phones or in internet cafes, printed pornography and adult movies from the pirated VCD and comic sellers.

Many Indonesian children are also exposed to violence in the media or some even in their neighbourhood. Therefore, they are in need of protection from every kind of bad influences of pornography, narcotic and psychotropic abuses and violence. One of the methods of protection is to prepare the children and equip them with high quality characters and values that could be the natural and internal filter and shield of bad influence from the environment. Internalization of good values would be very effective in the early years. Therefore, the integration of character building into the curriculum is very important. This could be the best way to prepare our generation to face the challenging situations.

C. Conclusion

It is the responsibility of governments, experts, and the media to educate stakeholders, to ensure that Indonesian children receive the best possible education, and to ensure that Indonesia climbs the educational rankings. If the new curriculum does not do this, it will not be for the lack of English, but for the lack of support for the majority of Indonesians who don't speak *Bahasa*

Indonesia as a mother tongue. I am in line with the following opinion given by TEFLIN (the Association of Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Indonesia) that government needs to clarify the status of the teaching of English in primary school. TEFLIN recommends that (a) English is a local component for schools that have qualified human resources and adequate capacity, (b) English is an extra-curricular for schools which have limited human resources and capacity, and (c) English should not be taught in elementary school that does not have the human resources and capacity at all. The best choice of the three options above is to enforce English language in elementary school as a local content so that certified English teachers in elementary school will not lose their jobs and high public interest toward English language will be accommodated.

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