

SHOULD ENGLISH BE A COMPULSORY SUBJECT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS?

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Abstract: In the Ministerial Decree of the Department of Education and Culture no. 060/U/1993 it was stated that English could be introduced to the fourth grade students of primary school as a local content subject. As a result, English is now treated as inseparable from the school curriculum as many schools feel the needs as well as the must to teach it. The most current issue on English at primary school in Indonesia at present is whether English should be included as a compulsory subject in the curriculum. This paper tries to discuss facts about young learners, the requirements needed for teaching English to young learners, and the practice of the teaching of English in primary schools which hopefully help answer the issue.

Key words: English, primary school, local-content subject.

In a seminar on English teaching held in 1986 by the Ministry of Education and Culture it was recommended that a national survey on the teaching of English in secondary school be conducted (Huda, 1999). In response to this recommendation, two surveys involving parents, teachers, and students of both public and private secondary schools were conducted. The first survey involving 8 provinces was conducted in 1988 and the second one conducted in 1989 involved 27 provinces. The results of the surveys showed that the majority of parent and student respondents stated that their children needed English in order to get good jobs in the future

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(Huda, 1994) and in order to complete their studies (Department of Education and Culture 1990 in Huda, 1999). They also stated that English was useful. In the second survey, it was also revealed that the students' achievement in English was unsatisfactory.

In response to the above results, in the paper prepared by the Ministry of Education and Culture for The 1992 National Meeting of the department it was stated that English might be taught in the primary schools as a local content subject if the local community considered that English proficiency was needed by the pupils (Huda, 1999). The statement above was then legalized in the Decree of the Ministry of Education and Culture (R.I./No.0487/4/1992, Chapter VIII) that stated that an elementary school could add some extra lessons in its curriculum as long as they were not in contradiction with the objectives of national education. In accordance with this policy, another decree (Ministry of Education and Culture, no. 060/U/1993) states that English can be introduced to the fourth grade students of primary school. However, due to the unfavourable conditions in Indonesia, for instance, the unavailability of sufficiently good English teachers for primary schools (Retmono, as quoted by Astika, 1996), the English instruction is determined as a local content subject at the elementary school level in the sense that the subject might be available at a particular elementary school provided that (1) the society in which the school is located requires it, and (2) the school meets certain qualifications such as: the provision of teachers with a sufficient breadth of knowledge of Teaching English as a Foreign Language for Young Learners and facilities to accommodate teaching-learning activities in English. The main issue why English should be taught as a local content subject in the elementary school seems to be related to the age of the learners, i.e., young learners can produce better results. Even though researchers do not agree to the exact 'critical period' for second language acquisition, a general belief holds that children can learn a foreign language better than adults.

As stated in the above decrees, English could be included in the primary school curriculum as a local content subject. That was why the Department of Education and Culture did not publish the English syllabus for primary school. The syllabus was supposed to be designed by the regional or provincial curriculum board. To support the decrees the provincial office of the Department of Education and Culture in East Java has legalized

a local English Syllabus for the primary school (No. 1702/I04/M/94/SK) (Suyanto, 1997). This instructional program states that by the end of primary schooling the students are expected to master simple English of 500 vocabulary items.

The inclusion of English as one of the local content subjects in the primary school was enthusiastically welcomed by both the schools and the community. A lot of primary schools, both public and private, teach English to their students not only as a local content subject but also as an extracurricular activity. Parents send their children to primary schools that offer English as a local content subject. Although it was decided upon as an optional subject, many schools felt the needs as well as the must to teach English partly because of the pressure from higher authorities, the parents' wishes, and the school headmasters' pride. As a result, it has been a fact that English is treated as inseparable from the school curriculum.

The introduction of English at the primary school seems to have been in line with four plausible arguments: (1) adolescent children in diverse regions in Indonesia need to speak English for the demands of tourism industries, (2) some educators believe that the earlier a child learns a foreign language, the better her/his opportunity in acquiring a high proficiency in the target language, (3) the longer the individual learns a language, the higher the proficiency she/he will achieve, and (4) the results of the current English instruction at the secondary level is unsatisfactory (Huda, 1994).

In a lecture on Teaching English to Young Learners by Huda (2001), it was mentioned that there was a proposal that English should be included as one of the compulsory subjects in the primary school curriculum. That is why, at present, the Minister of National Education wants to have some input whether the proposal can be materialized or not. This paper tries to discuss facts about young learners, the requirements needed for teaching English to young learners at school, and the practice of the teaching of English as a local content subject at the primary schools. The discussion will hopefully help answer the proposal whether English should be offered as a compulsory subject at the primary school or let it be a local content subject as it is now.

SOME FACTS ABOUT YOUNG LEARNERS

Children are by nature different from adults (Sinaga, 1997). They like moving and playing whereas adults seem reluctant to move and regard playing as childish. Children can absorb new things easily, but at the same time forget them quickly. Adults, on the other hand, find it difficult to absorb new things, but as soon as they acquire them, they keep them in mind for a longer time. Children feel at ease dealing with one thing at a time. Adults, on the contrary, are eager to know a lot of things at one time. They would like to learn everything in a very short time. Children get bored easily because they have a short span of attention or concentration. Adults, on the other hand, can spend a long time doing something especially if it is of their interest. Children also differ in their knowledge background from adults. As we all know, children are new to English and have not had any knowledge about the language. Adults on the contrary, have gained some knowledge of it as they learn it at school or from other sources.

Young children do not come to class empty-handed. They bring with them an already well-established set of instincts, skills, and characteristics which will help them to learn another language, i.e., their ability to grasp meaning, their skill in using language creatively, their capacity for indirect learning, their instinct for fun and play, their imagination and their instinct for interaction and talk (Halliwell, 1992). Each of those qualities help children in the foreign language classroom.

Very young children are able to understand what is being said to them even before they understand individual words. Intonation, gesture, facial expressions, actions, and circumstances help to tell them what the unknown words and phrases probably mean

They continue to use it in all their school work. When children encounter a new language at school, they call on the same skill to help them interpret the new sounds, words, and structures

In the early stages of their L1 development, children excel at making a little language go a long way: they are creative with grammatical forms and concepts. In order to make the most creative language skill the children bring with them, the teacher has to provide them with the occasions when (1) the urge to communicate makes them find some way of expressing themselves, (2) the language demanded by the activity is unpredictable

to encourage them to construct language actively for themselves. That is why games are important and useful as the fun element creates a desire to communicate and games can create unpredict-ability.

Children are not trying to learn phrases but they are concentrating on trying to guess right. By the time they have finished the repeated guessing, they will have confirmed words and structures they only half knew at the beginning. Guessing is actually indirect learning because the mind is engaged with the task and is not focusing on the language. We acquire language through continuous exposure and use. Both conscious direct learning and subconscious learning (acquisition) help someone internalize a new language. Each system has its own contribution in learning a language; conscious direct learning seems to encourage accuracy while unconscious indirect learning encourages spontaneous and therefore more fluent use. That is why, teacher needs to provide scope for both systems to operate. Children's capacity for conscious direct learning of forms and grammatical patterns is still relatively undeveloped. Children bring with them an enormous instinct for indirect learning. It is a good idea to set up real tasks in the language classroom by providing them with an occasion for real language use and let their subconscious mind work on the processing of language while their conscious mind is focused on the task. Teacher should provide an opportunity for the real using and processing of language while the mind is focused on the task of playing the games since games are very effective opportunity for indirect learning.

Children have an enormous capacity for finding and making fun. They bring a spark of individuality and of drama to any activities that they do. When playing, their personalities emerge, woven into the language use. In this way, they make the language their own. No matter how well teacher explains an activity, there is often someone in the class who produces a version of their own! Sometimes it is better than the teacher's original idea. Through their sense of fun and play the children are living the language for real.

Children delight in imagination and fantasy. They test out their versions of the world through fantasy and confirm how the world actually is by imagining how it might be different. Language teaching should be concerned with real life. However it would be a great pity if we are so concerned to promote reality in the classroom that we forgot that the reality

for children includes imagination and fantasy. The act fantasizing, of imagining, is very much an authentic part of being a child. Imagination provides another very powerful stimulus for real language use. It can also stimulate their creative imagination so that they want to use the language to share their ideas.

Children need to talk to become good at talking. The only way to learn a language is to use it. That is why, teachers must be sure that the desire to talk is working *for* learning not *against* learning.

THE REQUIREMENTS NEEDED FOR PROVIDING ENGLISH LESSONS TO YOUNG LEARNERS AT SCHOOL

As mentioned previously, children are by nature different from adults. As a consequence, children and adults also learn things, including English, in different ways. That is why, when it has been decided that English will be included in the school curriculum, whether it is as a local content subject or a compulsory one, the requirements needed for providing the lesson should be prepared. Sinaga (1997) mentioned that the requirements are: (a) the provision of qualified teachers, (b) the availability of syllabus or the curriculum and (c) the availability of teaching-learning facilities to support the learning process. If the program is not well planned, the result of the English program might be worse in the future.

Teachers

One of the most important requirements needed for providing English lesson in the primary school is the availability of qualified teachers. At least two qualifications are needed: (1) qualification in English and (2) qualification in teaching English to young learners. Teachers who are supposed to teach English in the primary schools should have good English competence and performance since they are going to be the model for their students. Mastering the target language, viz., English, is not the only requirement for teaching at the primary schools. Another requirements that should be fulfilled by teachers of English in the primary school is the skill to select instructional materials and the ability to choose appropriate teaching techniques for their students due to the unique characteristics of the students.

It should be acknowledged that at present only a few good English teachers can teach English to primary school students. This is due to the fact that the graduates of the English Education Department are not fully prepared to teach young learners. The students of the English Department are trained to be English teachers at secondary schools. It can be seen in the syllabus of the English Education Department of Universitas Negeri Surabaya, FKIP Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya and Universitas Negeri Malang that Teaching English to Young Learners is only a four-credit-hour optional subject. As a consequence, this course does not give the students adequate knowledge on how to deal with young learners.

Theoretically, primary school teachers should know the psychopedagogical, biological, language, and cognitive development of the learners which of course could not be learned in a short time in order for them to be able to plan suitable English lesson for the students (Kurnia, 1994). However, primary school classroom teachers who are supposed to have sufficient knowledge on those matters are not proficient in English due to the fact that English was not their major when they were studying at the SPG, PGSD or PGA. Their low proficiency in English will of course make them teach their students what they know about English, not what they should teach.

Syllabus

In order that the teaching of English at the primary school succeeds, a syllabus or a curriculum must be developed. The syllabus should present the goals, the teaching materials, and the teaching techniques recommended. Most syllabuses of language programs identify two sorts of goals: content goals and attitude goals. Content goals are concerned with the elements of language and ways in which they are used while attitude goals relate to the kind of learning experiences we set up and the relationships and atmosphere of the language classroom. Primary language work should give emphasis to the attitude goals since at the primary level teachers are not yet too tightly constrained by the content focus of the public examination system (Halliwell, 1992). The balance between the attitude goals and content goals shifts as a child moves through the educational system.

According to the GBPP published by the Provincial office of the De-

partment of Education and Culture of East Java, the teaching of English at the primary school level is mainly aimed at arousing the learner's interest in learning a foreign language. Eventually, it is expected that the skills of understanding verbal and non-verbal expressions in simple English can be developed at later levels of education. Both language components and language skills are presumed to be presented, with the focus on the development of Listening, Reading, Speaking and writing in accordance with their individual developmental level within the mastery of 500 English words applying the meaning-based approach.

Teaching and Learning Facilities

Other requirement that should be fulfilled to make the teaching of English successful is the availability of teaching and learning facilities that allow teachers to select and develop teaching materials to meet the needs and the characteristics of the students. The materials can be in the forms of books, textbooks, magazines, teaching aids, and other facilities that will allow teachers to choose and apply the appropriate techniques to achieve the goals.

Abe (1991) cited that young learners studying English as a foreign language should be treated differently from teenagers and adults. Learning English is different from learning their mother tongue. Special treatment is needed to attract the students' attention. Thus, in addition to the skill in selecting appropriate teaching materials, an EFL teacher at the primary school needs to know a variety of teaching techniques.

As stated by Krashen (1981) that the good language learner is the acquirer; he may or may not be conscious learner. In fact, young learners are acquirers. They learn a language in situations in which people communicate naturally. It implies that they communicate in a natural way. They are concerned more with the use of language to convey meaning rather than the correct usage of language. Formal instruction of the rules of usage is not necessary for acquirers. There are plenty of classroom activities which provide an extremely useful combination of real communication and quite deliberate rehearsal of a clearly identified set of

fairly restricted material to develop the four language skills (Halliwell, 1992).

A language is a fundamental part of being human. Learning a foreign language is a very abstract process. Experience shows that it does not appeal to everyone. In order to make it a human event, not just information, a language should be used for real communication, for genuinely giving and receiving real messages (Halliwell, 1992). Further, Dunn (1983) claims that many young children are still acquiring L1 inspite of the fact that they learn L2. In their desire to communicate--if the circumstances allow they create situations in which language can be acquired. They will experiment with sounds, words, or even longer expressions without worrying about mistakes. In other words, they rarely have the inhibitions typical of adolescents and adults. Whenever they learn another language, they will apply the same approaches as when they learn L1.

Pluckrose (as quoted by Dunn, 1983) further explains that children expect immediate results, that is, after the first English lesson, they want to be able to speak some English at home so that they will be praised by their parents and peers. In other words, they want to show off. Moreover, they long to be able to talk a lot in English quickly, in a grown-up manner. They want to use English in real experience. Hence, in learning a language, whether L1 or L2, children expect to use the language in real experiences, that is they want to communicate in the language learned in a natural way. For the maximum acquisition in the classroom, therefore, young learners need to be exposed to a program rich in meaningful, real – life activities in which communication takes place naturally. Attitudes such as confidence and risk-taking have a central role in language learning (Halliwell, 1992) since in the early stages children have limited resources that should be used creatively. That is why attitude goals are needed as they are a key part of the process by which language develops.

Halliwell (1992) further stated that the advantage of real language use in the classroom is that it contributes to the learning process by (a) encouraging the children to trust their instinct to predict meaning in spite of limited linguistic understanding; (b) providing an element of indirect learning in that the children are not concentrating on learning what they are listening to but the brain is processing it nonetheless; (c) confirming that language is something they actually use 'for real' and not just something they do exercises and games in; (d) increasing the amount of exposure the children get to the language, while still remaining within the

fairly predictable and narrowly focused limits of classroom talk. Because classroom talk is relatively limited, it is possible to teach a whole lesson almost entirely in the target language on the basis of small number of phrases and structures. However, teachers usually worry because (a) they do not fully master the target language and (b) they worry that the children will not understand and will behave badly. That is why, in the classroom, teachers should use simple target language as children can respond very well to context and facial expression.

THE PRACTICE OF THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS A LOCAL CONTENT SUBJECT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

As mentioned previously, that the ministerial decree that allows primary schools to offer English as a local content subject was enthusiastically welcomed by both schools and parents. English has now become an optional subject for primary school students and the number of schools that offers English as a local content subject is also increasing. In addition, research showed that the students' motivation and interest in learning English could be classified as very good (Agustina, et. al., 1997) and good (Syamsiah, 1999). However, this very promising condition might get ruined as research findings show that the implementation of English program in the elementary school is still far from satisfactory.

The Profile of the English Teacher

In the Ministerial Decree of the Department of Education and Culture no. 060/U/1993 it was stated that English could be introduced to the fourth grade students of primary school as a local content subject in the sense that the subject might be available at a particular elementary school provided that (1) the society in which the school was located required it, and (2) the school met certain qualifications such as: the provision of teachers with a sufficient breadth of knowledge of Teaching English to Young Learners. However, the fact showed that the inclusion of English as a local content subject in the primary schools was due to the pressure from higher authorities, the parents' wishes, and the school headmasters' pride (Susanto, 1998). In Kecamatan Taman Kabupaten Sidoarjo, a neighbouring town of Surabaya, for example, all public primary schools

offered English as a local content subject because of the instruction of the head of the local office (Kanin) of the Department of Education and Culture. Further, the school headmasters also stated that parents would not send their children to primary schools that did not offer English instruction.

The above fact forced primary school headmasters to include English in their curriculum even though there were no qualified English teachers at their schools. Out of the 29 primary school English teachers in Kecamatan Taman Kabupaten Sidoarjo, only three were the graduates of an English Department (Table 1). They were visiting teachers who came to the schools on a certain days in a week. Other teachers who had to teach English were classroom teachers who do not have English language education background. Even though they admitted their English mastery (pronunciation, structure, vocabulary) was insufficient and their language skills were consequently not very much different, they had to teach English because the headmasters assigned them to teach it, other teachers were not willing to teach it, they liked English, they felt they know it, and they felt they can teach it (Susanto, 1998).

Other research done by Rohmah (1996) and Senga (1998) in Kodya Malang also revealed the same phenomenon. Elementary School English teachers had no background knowledge of teaching English to young learners. As a result, the way they teach in the classroom was incongruent with the nature of young learners. In Kediri, Nurhayati (1996) found that due to the unqualified English teachers in some elementary schools, teachers were unable to construct a good lesson plan and required a model. This condition might also happen in different cities or towns.

In order to improve their English proficiency, the English teachers who did not have English education background attended private English course for a period of 6 to 12 months. However, their English knowledge and performance as well as their teaching performance were still far from being satisfactory. Classroom observations also support this inadequacy. Many teachers were found to be weak in both what to teach and how to teach it (Rachmawati, 1998).

Table 1. The Education Background of Primary School English Teachers at Kecamatan Taman Kabupaten Sidoarjo

No	Education Background	Total
1	SPG	15
2	PGA	1
3	SMU	2
4	Madrasah Aliyah	1
5	PGSD/PGSLP	4
6	S1 Graduate (Non-English Department)	6
7	S1 Graduate of English Department	3

(Susanto, 1998)

Other research on the teaching and learning process at some primary schools in Kotamadya Blitar done by Agustina et al. (1997) revealed that out of 10 primary school English teachers who were taken as the sample in the research only one was the graduate of PGSD. The other 9 were the graduates of English Department of STKIP that was why the researchers concluded that their language mastery was good and their ability in explaining the subject matter was sufficient. However, when the researchers observed the classes, it was revealed that their teaching proficiency was insufficient. This might happen because during their study at the English Department of STKIP, Teaching English to Young Learners Course was not offered.

Other studies on the teaching of English in Kodya Malang revealed that teachers had a low ability for classroom management in that they were not creative to enhance the teaching and learning process. They were commonly bound in the order of the materials presented in the textbooks which are sometimes very structured-based (Rachmajanti et al., 2000 and Sulistyو et al.,1998). Mursalim (1997) also found that teachers had difficulties in formulating instructional objectives for the selected materials, deciding the appropriate media and teaching techniques.

The Availability of the Syllabus

To support the implementation of English as a local content subject in the primary schools in East Java, the provincial office of the Department of Education and Culture in East Java has legalized a local English Syllabus for the primary schools (No. 1702/I04/M/94/SK) (Suyanto, 1997). This instructional program states that by the end of primary schooling the students are expected to master simple English of 500 vocabulary

items. This syllabus, developed in early 1994, was supposed to be a guideline to help teachers plan the English lesson at schools. However, until the third year of the implementation of English as a local content subject, not many teachers had it. In their research, Agustina et al. (1997) found that all primary school teachers who were the sample of their research did not have the syllabus. In Kecamatan Taman, Kabupaten Sidoarjo, the primary school English teachers only had the syllabus for grade 4 (Lestari, et al., 1999). Because of the unavailability of the syllabus, the teachers did not make any lesson plan (Agustina et al., 1997 and Lestari et al., 1999). Teachers did not refer to the syllabus when choosing the materials. The materials presented in the classroom are the ones presented in the textbooks. They used the materials presented in the textbooks as a 'guideline' for teaching English.

The Taching and Learning Activities

As mentioned previously, that most primary school English teachers did not have the English syllabus or if they had it, it was only for grade 4. That is why they did not make any lesson plans before teaching (Agustina, et al., 1997 and Lestari, 1999). Teachers did not refer to the syllabus when choosing the materials. What they presented in the classroom was the materials available in the textbooks. This might be caused by the fact that most schools did not have sufficient English teaching facilities, such as books, teaching aids, and teaching media, that might be used as references when the teachers selected and chose the materials (Rohmah, 1996).

In conducting the English lesson, most teachers did not implement the Communicative/theme-based Approach (Agustina, et al, 1997). They presented the language components and language skills separately. No teachers used English as a means of communication both during the class hours and outside the classroom. The reason for not using English in the classroom was that they were afraid that their students did not understand what they were talking about. This is of course in contradiction with what Halliwell (1992) said that teachers should use the target language in the classroom. They did not realize that it was possible to teach a whole lesson almost entirely in the target language on the basis of small number of phrases and structures as classroom talk was relatively limited.

Other research on the teaching of English in some primary schools in

Malang found that teachers mostly employed such simple techniques as question and answer, memorizing, and providing explanation even though 64% of the teachers were of the opinion that students hated listening to the teachers' monotonous explanation (Dardiri, 1994). Astika (1996) who did similar research in some primary schools in Central Java and Yogyakarta Special Territory revealed that during the English lesson, 54.25% of the class hour was used by teachers for explaining the lesson, asking questions, giving instruction, and drilling. Students only used 14,9 % of the class hour for practicing the language while the remaining 30% of the class hour was spent for other activities categorized as "Silence and Confusion". Students used the 14,9% of the class hour for drilling (9.28%), answering questions (4.85%), and expressing their ideas (0.77%). From this research we can see that English classroom at the primary schools was dominated by teachers. Students only used a small amount of the class hour for self-expression.

A preliminary observation on the English test that must be done by primary school students shows that the test was made by a board. Schools in one area (kecamatan/kabupaten) belong to a certain *rayon*. In the *rayon*, there is a board whose members are teachers who teach the EBTANAS subjects at their schools. One of the duties of this board is to develop tests for the EBTANAS subjects. Since English becomes one of local content subjects in the primary schools, English teachers also become the member of this board. It seems that English is treated differently from that of other local content subjects, such as Bahasa Daerah and Ketrampilan dan Kesenian. There is no centralized tests for these two subjects as the board normally develops tests for EBTANAS subjects only. That is why, the students in one area do the same English tests in the UTC (Ulangan Tengah Cawu) and UC (Ulangan Cawu). It happens not only in small towns like Nganjuk and Sidoarjo but also in big cities such as Malang, Surabaya and Jakarta. This of course makes English teachers in the primary schools concentrate on how to prepare their students do the test so that they will get good mark in English. That is why, it is not surprising if English teachers pay more attention to content goals rather than on attitude goals. This is contradictory with what Halliwell (1992) suggested that the priority of the teaching of EFL in the primary schools should be on attitude goals, not on content goals.

All of the studies cited above show that English lesson is not properly handled in the primary schools. This happens because of the fact that those who teach English at the primary schools are those who do not have English education background or if they have, they were not trained to be English teachers for young learners. Secondly, it seems that the schools force themselves to offer English as a local content subject because of the pressure from the higher authorities (head of the local office), school and headmaster's prestige, and the parents' prestige. That is why even though the schools do not have qualified English teachers and the teaching facilities available at the school is also insufficient, they force themselves to teach English to their students.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Teaching English to children in Indonesia is a new field and was not a special need until the new curriculum was introduced. Teachers are not trained to teach children who naturally have different characteristics from those of adults or teenagers. As a consequence, they treat their students as adults. That is why before taking the decision whether English should be included in the national content subjects, decision makers should have a closer look at the practice of the teaching of English as a local content subject in different parts of the country as the researches quoted above were done in several towns or cities. If the English lesson is appropriately conducted in a lot of different places, then English might be included as a national content subject. If it is not, then we should be happy with what we have now, that is including English as a local content subject in the curriculum.

If we want to include English as a national content subject we should prepare everything neatly so that the teaching process can be conducted. In order to be able to include English in the school curriculum, ideally, we should have professional English teachers for young learners, syllabus, and good facilities. However, since our country still suffers from a very bad economic crisis, what we can do now is to train teachers or student-teachers to be professional English teachers for young learners who are able to conduct English lesson in the primary schools. This is due to fact that English lesson in the primary schools must be professionally handled. Otherwise, the results will be the joy of learning English will vanish and

English as a language of communication will be hated and forgotten. If this happens, one of the goals of introducing English to primary school students, i.e., to help improve the unsatisfactory results of the teaching of English at secondary schools (Huda, 1999) will be difficult to achieve.

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