

SOME CONSIDERATIONS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The Indonesian government has acknowledged the importance of English by putting it into the education system for five decades. English has been integrated to secondary school for a long time. As the English language is getting stronger influence in the modern world and has become an international language, also, the advantages of introducing a foreign language for young learners, the government of Indonesia then has set up the policy to introduce English language in primary schools. This policy is optional. It depends on schools and community demands. The government does not provide teachers and curriculum. Schools and community are in charge to provide teachers, curriculum and facilities. Teachers are one of the most important parts in the discourse of education and the process of teaching and learning in schools. Furthermore, there are some important considerations before conducting the programs since young children have specific characteristics. It was this that interested me to write a research about some considerations of English language teaching for primary students.

Abstrak

Pemerintah Indonesia mengakui bahwa bahasa Inggris sangat penting dalam sistim pendidikan yang telah berlangsung selama kurun waktu lima tahun terakhir. Bahasa Inggris sudah beritegrasi ke sekolah-sekolah sampai tingkat atas dalam waktu yang sudah lama. Selama ini bahasa Inggris memiliki pengaruh yang sangat kuat dalam dunia modern dan menjadi salah satu alat komunikasi yang sangat penting dalam hubungan internasional, juga sangat memberikan keuntungan bagi para pelajar dan generasi muda. Dalam hal ini pemerintah Indonesia kemudian diharapkan memberi kebijakan tersebut untuk mengenalkan pelajaran bahasa Inggris di Sekolah-sekolah Dasar. Kebijakan ini merupakan tambahan di Sekolah dan sangat diminati oleh masyarakat. Pemerintah tidak mesti harus mencetak guru-guru dan menyediakan kurikulum tersebut. Tetapi sekolah dan masyarakat termasuk para guru mesti yang menyediakan kurikulum dan fasilitas tersebut. Para guru adalah salah satu bagian pokok penting dalam memberikan proses pendidikan dan pengajaran di Sekolah. Lagipula, ada beberapa pertimbangan-pertimbangan penting sebelum melaksanakan program itu karena umumnya generasi muda sangat membutuhkan karakter yang sangat spesifik. Untuk itulah saya sangat tertarik meneliti beberapa pertimbangan-pertibimbangan tentang perlunya pengajaran bahasa Inggris kepada Generasi Muda.

Kata kunci: pengajaran bahasa Inggris, generasi muda, sekolah dasar.

1. Introduction: An Overview of Language

In this section, I start by briefly discussing language in general. Many researchers have offered definitions of language:

Language is complex. It involves considerably more than merely speaking and listening. Language is the vehicle for all human communication in its many forms – speaking, writing, printing, expressive behavior – a living, dynamic vehicle. The sounds and symbols of language differ widely from country to country as separate people have developed patterns which serve their needs most effectively. (Frost, 1967: 1– 2).

In Webster's Third New International Dictionary cited by Greene and Petty (1967: 21) note that language is audible, articulate human speech as produced by action of the tongue and adjacent vocal organ. It describes language as any means, vocal or other expressing or communicating feeling or through. However, this excludes the instinctive communicative acts one generally associates with animals.

Another definition about language comes from Emmitt and Pollock (1997) They define Language is as not only listening, speaking, reading, and writing but also non-verbal codes. Speech is prominent, but so are a range of non – verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body gestures (Emmitt and Pollock, 1997). They also note that language is about making and sharing meaning. Language is not spoken individually; it is as a means of communication between people. They finally define language as a system of arbitrary signs agreed to by a community of users, transmitted and received for a specific, purpose, in relation to the shared world of the users.

Greene and Petty (1967: 25) offer three functions of language. First, language is as means of communication where ideas, thoughts, feelings, and emotions are shared. The second function of language is as a vehicle of thought. Language plays an important thing in the process of thinking. While in the thinking process needs the mental manipulation of symbols that represent certain meanings. The last one is as the transmission of culture. They believe that from language we could identify culture from one generation to the next generation. Through recorded language people have shared the accumulation of human experience and conveyed it to posterity (Greene and Petty, 1967: 29).

A similar view can be found from Emmitt and Pollock (1997: 22). They see the functions of language as a social interaction, social values and to exchange information. Language as a social interaction refers to different people with different cultures. Language can identify and mark out the distinction between different people's culture. Language as a social value relates to how individuals and groups use language to negotiate social relationship, in other words, language provides other ways to negotiate social values. The function of language in exchanging information concerns with language as a share information media. People inquire something by asking information from each other. They can also tell each other things through language.

2. Children's Language Development

The work of Brooks (1967) argues that any child can learn any language with nothing to go on save what he was born with and the language in action of those about him. He furthermore explains learning a language is similar to learning other sciences. It does not occur spontaneously but it takes time and needs certain procedures to be followed. Starting point, time, schedule, and course

content, and continuity are all recommended in a language learning process.

Even from the moment of the child is born; he already starts learning the world around him (Frost, 1967: 2). According to Frost, for the first few months of his birth, he begins speaking “the cooing” and develops into “the babbling” stage as starting point before he knows and understand words and phrases.

A child’s first cry is considered to be the starting point in the development of language. Children make the first articulation on the way to developing speech and the resources of language that underpin speech. Children begin to develop a language from the moment of birth. Tough (1985) argues that young children have a facility for echoing the speech of others without necessarily understanding its meaning, and then they start to use speech intentionally to express meaning by talk. During the first year, children listen to the language of their environment and respond by babbling and producing some vocalizations. Lindfors (1987: 124) suggests children also develop many concepts and prerequisites to linguistic development. The children develops an understanding of self and other as distinct entities, an understanding one would have to have it “self” is going to communicate with “other”.

The study by Chomsky (1965) discovered that child’s linguistic ability has existed since she/he was born. He argues that each individual who comes to this world is equipped with a language acquisition device, which

allows the child to come up with phrases and sentences he/she may have picked up from environment. It is this device that allows a child to acquire naturally, the language spoken in the environment and to become fluent in that language by age 4 – 5. An example by Dardjowijojo (2004: 1) demonstrates this process:

If an Indonesian child was born in the New York, and he or she is using English as a medium of language to communicate for several years, he or she can speak not only English but also he or she is able to imitate English New York accent.

In fact, the difference of each child language skill is what language is spoken in the environment. Since English surrounds the child's language, he or she masters the American English. It is different when he or she was born in China. He or she is able to speak Chinese.

(My translation from original Indonesian)

This experience is what happens to some Indonesian families, including our family, who bring children with us during our time in Australia. Initially, our children can only speak either Indonesian or their local language. However, when they are in childcare or school, they only need a little time to be able to speak English with an Australian accent.

Krashen (1982) as cited by Sutarsyah (2004) proposes two supporting theories, critical age hypothesis and affective theory. The critical age theory is child's brain biologically has a high elasticity that enables him or her to acquire easily any language including second and foreign language. This device will stop after the adolescent period, because at that stage child language development tends to stop and become unproductive. While the affective theory is language acquisition occurs when there is comprehensible

input from either spoken or written form. Then this input can become intake provided that affective condition of a child is favorable. When affective filters prevent the child from fully utilizing the comprehensible input, the acquisition stops. However, this will occur when a learner has reached an unfavorable age.

During the following years, children absorb many words and develop linguistically by imitation. At this stage, parents play an important role in the way that children acquire skill in linguistic expressions (McCarthy cited in Frost, 1967: 3). However, media such as radio and television also bring a great influence to children's linguistic development. Tough (1985) points out children have acquired knowledge of the language used in the home at the age of five. They are able to talk about what they are doing and comment on what others are doing. They can demonstrate a great number of language functions such as thanking, asking, and explaining. Emmitt and Pollock explain:

Generally by the time children are six years of age, they have mastered the major structures of the language they are learning. But they continue to modify and develop their language in many ways after they commence school. In addition to a growing capacity to do things with language, children develop an increasing awareness of language itself. They become verbally playful and, as they move through the primary school if all goes well, they can explain how, and why jokes, stories and other texts work (1997: 180-181).

Moreover, McCarthy cited in Frost (1967: 5) observes that when the children are in the kindergarten stage, they have reached thousand words, and

they are able to demonstrate skill in sentence usage, listening and other communicative skills.

Furthermore, when they go to school at the age of five or six, the school shares the home's continuity responsibility for the language development. However, during the period of their primary school they have experienced significant language development; they still have much to learn about how to explore language. The next issue to be discussed is the introduction of English language teaching at the young learners in English as foreign language contexts.

3. General Considerations of ELT at Primary Level

3.1 Background

The introduction of a foreign language at primary level has been a matter of debate for many years. In the industrialized countries like the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia, a foreign language at primary level is not a new thing. There are also some primary schools, which apply a foreign language as a medium of transferring knowledge that is content-based language instruction. This study of a second language at primary level is regarded as highly desirable. A study by an American researcher, Andersson (1969) notes:

There are countries in which conditions would be greatly improved if from an early age all children acquired a useful control of a second language: English or French in Canada, Sinhalese or Tamil in Ceylon, French or Flemish in Belgium, for example. And in our own country the

early mastery of a second language by English – speaking children (French in New England and Louisiana; German in Pennsylvania, Texas, and various parts of the Midwest; Chinese and Japanese on the Pacific coast; and Spanish in New York, Florida, and the Southwest, for example) could be expected to improve the social relations between linguistic groups politically and economically

One of the considerations of introducing a foreign language in the primary schools according to Bumpass (1963: 4) is the enthusiastic and interested of the expression of young children as they respond with ease, correctness, and pleasure, becomes a satisfying argument instead of giving it to secondary level. Furthermore, Bumpass offers two major advantages of introducing foreign language to children. Firstly, young children own an auditory perception and memory so they can learn to repeat sound quickly and accurate and can retain the new learning without problems. Secondly, children have fewer inhibitions and respond with greater ease and less – consciousness, ever present problems, which often experienced by adult students.

3. 2 Suitable Time to Learn a Foreign Language

McGrath (1967) believes the process of language learning for children should be at an age when they are naturally curious about language, when they have fewest inhibitions, and when they imitate most easily new sounds and sound patterns. The theory of Vygotsky, a Russian linguist, on children's language development regards the role of language as providing children with

a new tool and the role of adults as bringing the world for children by doing things and organizing information through the use of words as symbols.

Introducing a foreign language at an early age, particularly at primary level is considered to be the best time for children to acquire a foreign language. The view of Dunn suggests:

Young children are acquirers. Acquisition takes place subconsciously in situations where speakers communicate naturally. In these situations, speakers are more concerned with the use of language to convey meaning than with the correct usage. They want to say something, and without thinking to communicate with the language they know ('use) rather than analyze it in order to find out the correct 'usage' or way to use it (1983: 3).

In 1956, a conference held by the Modern Language Association of America released a recommendation of the consideration of teaching a foreign language at an early age (Ratte, 1967). The report expresses the view that:

The optimum age for beginning the continuous learning of a second language seems to fall within the span of ages 4 through 6, with superior performance to be anticipated at ages 8,9,10. In these early period the brain seems to have the greatest plasticity and specialized capacity needed for acquiring speech. The specialized capacity includes the ability to mimic accurately the stream of speech (sounds, rhythm, intonation, stress, etc.) and to learn and manipulate language patterns easily. Support for the conviction that the brain has greater plasticity for speech learning during the first decade of life comes from the fact that in cases of gross destruction of the cerebral speech areas return of normal speech occurs much more rapidly and more completely than at a later age (Levenson and Kendrick, 1967: 58).

Children who have already successfully acquired skills in their mother tongue do not seem to have difficulties in learning a foreign language.

According to Emmit and Pollock (1997), maintaining separate contexts for the two languages helps to avoid any possible confusion in the learning process. The work of Brown (1980) as cited by Emmit and Pollock (1997: 189) clearly supports the view. Brown argues that research on non – simultaneous second language learning in childhood indicates that linguistic and cognitive processes similar to those used in first language learning are used. The foreign language learning process does not interfere with the language that the children already have. They have an ability to differentiate and adapt from one language to another language as they are learning.

One other advantage for children in learning a foreign language is that they will be excited to learn something new and will enjoy it. Dunn (1983) argues that children are willing to use language and experiment with sounds, without worrying about making mistakes, which is often a barrier for adult learners. Learning a foreign language may become fun and pleasant for them as long as the materials and activities are suitable for their elementary level. Correction is regarded as a natural means of learning, which does not diminish their self – esteem. They interact spontaneously without any sense of shame (Kismadi, 2004).

3.3 The Objectives of ELT at Primary Level

The objectives of English language learning for young learners based on the work of Hawkes as cited by Dunn (1983: 33) is that “age, cultural context and general educational priorities influence content more than purely linguistic considerations”. Ratte (1967) express a similar view, “the main objectives of a long sequence foreign language program are twofold: linguistic and cultural”. However, Hawk points out that the cultural part is sometimes the secondary goal with a primary focus on the development of language skill.

The introduction of English language in primary schools in Indonesia is based on the policy of the Department of Education in 1992, which was the basis for the 1994 curriculum. According to Sutarsyah (2004), the goal of English language teaching in primary school in Indonesia is to enable young students to master simple communication suitable for the child’s world, limited to listening and speaking. Reading and writing are not emphasized: the program focuses on simple expression and sentences. It is hoped that having these skills, the learners will have positive attitudes towards the use of English which at the same time can build motivation to learn English in their future study.

The application of the program depends on the school and parents’ decision. An appropriate lesson plan and methodology aims to motivate

students to follow the program. Language use should be simple and familiar and cover daily activity.

3.4 Teaching Techniques and Media

The implementation of the English program at primary level must be taken seriously regarding the characteristics of young learners. It must encourage them to participate actively during the class. Therefore, instructional materials play an important role in this program. Teachers should select materials carefully based on the objectives and students' interest.

Various kinds of materials, for example, songs, stories, games and reading materials are considered useful for elementary students. It is important for them not only teaching them words but also allow them to play with the language. Abe (1991) cited by Suyanto (2004), observed that young children studying English should be treated differently from teenagers and adults. Special treatment is needed to attract students' attention. Teachers should know a variety of techniques such as techniques of asking questions, conducting group activities, playing games, singing songs and using media.

As Brooks (1967) has indicated, three approaches must be considered: descriptive linguistics (language), psychology (learning), and cultural anthropology (meaning). Ratte (1967) suggests appropriate language teaching techniques can be dialogues, narratives, action series, and short

dramatizations. The dialogue provides not only an exchange of conversation between two or more students but also creates imaginary situations within the experience and interests of students. The dialogue should talk about simple and familiar situations such as home, family, school, class, numbers, days, months, and colors. Narrative and action series allow the students to talk and describe someone or something. An oral presentation describing interesting people or places is a form of narration, while action series might be describing someone's daily activity. Role-play is also a very useful way to improve children's language as well as short, interesting stories, well prepared and suitable for the language level of children.

However, the teacher needs to know how well children can absorb the materials. According to Dunn (1983), teachers must know what concepts students already know and what concepts they are likely to learn during the school year. Some materials are sometimes so difficult that teacher can change to different activities, which are more suitable for the language development and experience of children. Songs, games, and story reading are considered useful activities to avoid boredom. Most children like singing. They memorize songs easily even without understanding the words. Ratte (1967) defines games as an effective means of motivation, which provide a change of pace in classroom activity. Games can be profitable and pleasant language learning experiences when they are well prepared, presented, and controlled. Most children are keen to participate in such activities.

Richards (1988) has indicated that good instructional media should have three roles: attention role, communicational role, and retention role. The objectives of using media are to attract the learners' attention and heighten their curiosity. In this case, pictures and realia are very helpful for the teacher to do the activity.

The use of audio-visual media is considered to bring a great number of advantages in the learning process. Colorful charts, flash cards, pictures, photo, and filmstrips help the students to build an imaginative understanding of the new language. Improving pronunciation can be effective if the teacher presents a standard model of English so that children find easier to imitate the language. The work of Ratte (1967: 285 - 286) clearly states the advantages of using television as a means of instruction:

Television programs can bring to a large numbers of students a master teaching having native or near-native pronunciation, a professionally prepared presentation of the language, and cultural material filed in the country or countries where the target language is spoken.

The use of television will bring a direct impact because children are able to see things clearly. However, a follow up presentation about the materials is still needed.

3.5 Classroom Settings

Ward (1979) observes that the class size must be limited because young children need individual attention. Children need to be paid attention

and encouraged regularly and continuously. Teachers play an important role in the success of the program since children are dependent so much especially for the first couple of week. According to Dunn (1983), young children are eager to build a relationship with their teacher. To build up a good relationship, he suggests that children have to feel the teacher respects them and understand their needs.

A group, which consists of more than ten children, seems to be impossible for the lesson to be managed. Similarly, the size of the class cannot be too small since each child can also learn by hearing others repeat a word or phrase, so the ideal situation implies a group of reasonable size which can support the learning process (Ward, 1979). However, if there is more than one group of up to ten children, the teacher should have lists made of children belonging to each group and stick to these lists as regularly as possible (Ward, 1979). Similarly, when the size class is too small, it is not a good situation because language interaction is needed among students.

The choice of time and duration of length of the lesson will influence the language learning process. Children will not be comfortable and enjoy the learning when they are hungry and tired. Early in the morning or in the afternoon is highly recommended since they are still fresh and interested. Ward (1979) observes that four periods of 15 minutes or three periods of 20 minutes per week seem to produce the best result and are more effective than a single one-hour meeting once a week. However, according to Dunn (1983),

lessons which are too short do not give children enough time to get 'warmed up' or for sufficient experiences to take place for adequate acquisition and consolidation. In contrast, long lessons will make children bored and lose concentration. Once they lose concentration and motivation, the teacher should change an activity and encourage children's curiosity.

The environment of the learning process must be taken into account. The environment should allow the students to be active to listen to and join the activity. The children will feel secure and enjoy the activity if they are placed in a situation, which is familiar to them. The learning process will have a better result when a clean, quiet, peaceful classroom supports it. In contrast, the children will not enjoy and lose the motivation if the classroom is small, dark, and unpleasant or gets disturbance by other groups. As Dunn (1983: 30) has indicated:

Atmosphere is important for children and if teachers expect them to use only English in the lesson, children as much help as possible to make the transition from language 1. It is possible to create an English atmosphere in a classroom with pictures, notices and books in English or by playing English songs in the cassette.

The teacher can arrange the chairs to accommodate a real life activity for children. A round table, for example, will be so useful so that they can see, work, and listen to each other. A carpet could be another choice for the teacher to change the mood. Both teacher and students then can sit on the floor together to do the activities.

3.6 The Role of Teachers

In terms of teacher qualification, an understanding and liking of children are necessary. Teacher must have a psychological notion of the world of children. The work of Cameron (1994) as cited by Luciana (2004) reports that, while learning a foreign language, young learners are in the process of organizing their world: forming and refining their concepts and ideas as they endeavor to internalize the surrounding input. The relationship between teacher and student must be harmonized. Teachers and students should be involved together so that students feel secure and settled to follow the program. Teachers should have specialist qualifications in English and know the primary school environment. Teachers could also be an elementary school teacher who has been trained in the teaching of English to young children (Brook, 1967).

A teacher should plan the practice and drills needed to enable the students to hear the sounds of the language accurately; otherwise they will not be able to produce them (Ratte, 1967). Children memorize language more easily and with more enjoyment than adults. Before starting speaking a foreign language, for the first step they listen and watch the language spoken by the teachers for a certain time so that the students understand, learn and are able to speak the language spontaneously. To quote Dunn (1983: 5):

A programme which follows the same framework, with familiar and new activities slotted into it, gives children an opportunity to predict the

meaning of the language used, since much of it, for example the organization language, will be the same. With regular repetitions of the same prefabricated language, children quickly understand situations and memorize the language involved. It appears that children learning another language have a great capacity to imitate and memorize long utterances as they have already had to do this when learning language 1.

The children are natural language learners because they imitate the teacher or friend spontaneously. The teachers must use English as much as possible as the medium of instruction during the program. However, if there are misunderstandings and quarrels among the children, the teachers need a mother tongue language to solve them.

3.7 Parents' Supports

Parental attitude towards learning English at primary level can influence the learning result. Although parents recognize the importance of mastering English both written and spoken, I still found some parents doubt that English should be taught in primary schools. In this case the school and teacher play an important role in explaining to the parents the advantages of English language teaching in the primary school. In relation to attitude towards language, students who feel positive about the language will have a greater success than the students with a negative attitude (Emmitt and Pollock, 1997). The parents' attitude to determining the success of the study by achieving good marks needs to be changed. Learning a foreign language takes a long time. The parents and home bring the strongest influence on a child's life. Furthermore Ward (1979: 30) notes:

The teacher must produce the best possible surroundings, both physically and mentally, to encourage the child to learn and to enjoy doing so. This means that sometimes has to try to influence parents and kindergarten personnel in a positive way and gain their support she plans to do with the children. She must also try to keep in touch with parents, invite them to visit the foreign-language lessons so that they can be made aware of what is going on in the meetings.

According to Dunn (1983), if parents are interested in their children's achievement in English and show appreciation of their success, the children will be motivated. For the children, they want to make their parents proud by showing what they have achieved during their language learning. The parent's appreciation will be very important for them. Dunn (1983) concludes children without parental support are undoubtedly at a disadvantage.

Conclusion

The English language is exerting even stronger influence in the modern world and has become an international language. It is considered that there is great number of advantages of introducing a foreign language for young learners. The government of Indonesia has therefore set up the policy to introduce English language in primary schools. Although this policy is optional to the schools, there are some considerations to think about before conducting the program.

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