

English Education at Elementary School in Japan

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the implementation of English education in elementary school in Japan. What challenges faced by the implementation of English education in elementary school. This paper reviewed some articles and book chapter regarding teaching English at elementary school in Indonesia and Japan, and the principles of teaching English to young learners (TYL). First, it provides an overview of the characteristics of young learners and challenges faced by teachers in the teaching English to young learners. Second, it will briefly describe the history of English education in Japan, followed by the discussion of the present implementation of English education at elementary schools. Finally, it relates the discussion of English education at elementary school to Indonesian context.

Key Words; English Education, Elementary School, TYL

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 90s, English education has been introduced to some elementary schools in Indonesia. The reasons behind the introduction was likely because the perceptions of the role of English as a global language and as a language to obtain more advanced knowledge, especially in science and technology. The Indonesian Government through its Ministry of Culture and Education issued a decree number 060/U/1993 dated February 25th, 1993 stating that English can be taught at elementary school but only as part of local-content curriculum. Further, this local-content curriculum is the one which is based on the regional needs assessment. The learning materials of local-content curriculum are adapted to the natural environment, social, cultural, and economic needs for the regional development and are organized as an independent school subject. The decree was followed up by the local government through its Department of Education and Culture in the form of local regulation. Thus, the essence of foreign language has become away from its original function of the language that is to communicate with the rest of globe residents.

In its development, the absence of national curriculum of English education for elementary school in Indonesia arose some challenges, especially on what to teach and how to teach it. Since the curriculum was developed locally, each district—even among elementary schools in one

district—might have different learning materials and ways of teaching it. Some schools might use local textbooks with traditional teaching method of rote memorization of English words and their translation. Others might use imported textbooks accompanied by the use of multimedia software. In this regard, Alek (n.d.) found some weaknesses in the local-content curriculum of English, namely the incompatibility between the material and the students' cognitive development and the unrealistic choice of topic, teaching methodology, and learning objectives. This reality has made the teachers think multiple aspects rather than prepare to teach English well.

Furthermore, this condition was likely to produce a wide range of differences in students' interests and proficiency level which tended to become another set of challenges for teachers in the secondary level where English was taught as a compulsory school subject. Consequently, the desired target that English is an International language has been stuck in the formality of teaching English. Thus, the direction of this local content has led to distortion.

Teachers' competence in teaching English to young learners (TYL) augmented the abovementioned challenges. Since English education at elementary school was treated as a subject of local-content curriculum, some school would assign the homeroom teachers who did not have educational background in teaching English to handle the class. Other schools even hired the undergraduate students majoring in English education to handle the class. The inadequate knowledge in teaching English to young learners might cause the lack of confidence in the part of the teachers to teach English, especially when it came to the speaking/ pronunciation part, and the flows in teaching methods. Thus, the emphasis of English education at elementary school would be more on memorizing loose words and sentence patterns instead of the search for meaning and intention.

Considering the effectiveness of teaching English at elementary school and the apprehension that might burden the students, the Indonesian government through the Ministry of National Education in 2014 stated that it was no longer necessary to include English education at elementary school. Hence, English has become a dump language in education yet it has become trigger for mushrooming private English course on the sake of the need for communication in daily life.

Another reason to kick it out was the need to prioritize the teaching of Bahasa Indonesia as the national language and to nurture the students' nationalism. The intention to exclude English education from elementary school curriculum attracted different responses from public, especially

the educators and parents. Some people agreed to the idea, but many considered that this would ignore the need to participate in the era of communication and globalization (Hapsari, 2014). This condition is in dissimilarity with the English education in Japan.

Besides being well-known for its advanced in technology, Japan is also famous for its outstanding education system. Similar to Indonesian context, English is positioned as a foreign language in Japan, and in 1998 Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) announced that English can be introduced at elementary schools from 2002 in the form of Foreign Language Activities (Ikegashira, Matsumoto, and Morita, 2009). Yet, the history has changed it differently.

Henceforth, this paper aims to discuss the implementation of English education in elementary school in Japan. First, it will provide an overview of challenges in the teaching English to young learners. Second, it will briefly describe the history of English education in Japan, followed by the discussion of the present implementation of English education at elementary schools. Finally, it relates the discussion of English education at elementary school to Indonesian context.

TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

Children whose are ranged from six to eleven are usually categorized as young learners, compared to very young children – aged around four to six – and pre-pubescent children – aged twelve to thirteen. The challenges in teaching English to young learners are probably related to children's characteristics in terms of intellectual development, attention span, sensory input, and affective factors which differentiate them from teenage and adult learners (Brown, 2000). Each of the characteristics is elaborated as follows,

Intellectual development. According to Piaget (in Brown, 2000) children are in the stage of concrete operation, meaning that they learn only from what they can sense using their five sensing organs. Explaining something which is abstract or using abstract language very often causes misunderstanding in the part of the children. Thus, English teachers are expected to introduce the language using concrete language, avoiding the use of metalanguage to describe things, and providing a wide opportunity for the children to experience the language through examples and repetition.

Attention span. Children are different from adult in terms of attention span. It is said that children have a short attention span for about five to ten minutes. Unless the activity is very attractive, they may get bored easily. This characteristic requires the English teachers to vary their activity in one lesson. Using different kinds of attractive instructional media, such as songs, colorful flashcards, storybooks, and puppets, may help teachers to keep the students' attention span for one lesson.

Sensory input. As being mentioned previously, children learn through concrete objects; they understand not only from explanation, but also from what they see, hear, touch, and interact. Asking children to memorize names of animals or the pattern of Present Continuous Tense, for instance, will not help their understanding of the language. In order to cater the children's need to use sensory input to internalize concepts in English, teachers can provide them with physical activities and hands-on activities, such as role play, games, coloring, and making handcraft.

Affective factors. Despite the common thought that children learn new languages without any psychological burden as adult learners do, children are also affected by inhibition, especially when they perceive the language as something apart from their daily life. Teachers' frequent correction of children's linguistic mistakes may add to their inhibition and later could create high affective filter to learning English.

Regarding this case, some researcher did a research. It was reported that Copland, Garton, and Burns (2014) carried out a study on challenges in teaching English to young learners, involving 4,459 teachers in 142 countries. The results of their study show that globally teachers are challenged by their teaching skills and students differentiation. Teachers' response to questions about teaching skills in the form of difficulty in getting students to speak in English, handling students who are lack of discipline and students have low motivation in learning English, teaching writing and teaching grammar. In term of students' diversity, teachers are to response to the students' different learning stages and individual needs. Besides the global language, Copland, Garton, and Burns also found some local challenges involving class size, teachers' confidence in teaching English, and time pressure. This finding might be useful for any Indonesian English teachers at Elementary school to practice.

The above discussion could argue that teaching English to young learners is not easier than teaching English to teenage and adult learners. A careful plan on the teaching methodology and

learning material as well as instructional media may provide the young learners a meaningful experience in learning English as a foundation to continue to the next level.

HISTORY OF ENGLISH EDUCATION AT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN JAPAN

The Japanese school system is often described as a 6-3-3-4 system, based on the number of years spent in each of the respective schools – 6 years of elementary school, 3 years of junior high school, 3 years of senior high school, and 4 years of university. However, private school may have 6-6-4 system in which the junior and the senior high schools are combined. The elementary and junior high schools constitute compulsory education which last for nine years. Even though senior high school is not part of compulsory education, it is a requirement if students want to enter higher education such as universities or colleges. All aspects of education are regulated by The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Through its Course Study Guidelines MEXT determine the curriculum, textbook, classes, and the level of education throughout Japan. This is what made difference from that of Indonesian government.

English-language education or *eigo-kyouiku* begins at the first year of junior high schools and continues at least until the third year of high school. In these levels, English is taught with focus on grammar and translation as preparation for taking university examination where English is one of the compulsory subjects (Ikegashira, Matsumoto, and Morita: 2009).

According to Kasuya and Kuno (2010) the history of English education at elementary school in Japan actually began in 1992 when MEXT chose two elementary schools and one junior high school in Osaka City to start the experimental English activities in public education. In 1998 a new approach called “The Period for Integrated Studies” was introduced to elementary school including international understanding, information and ICT technology, environmental studies, and social welfare/health. When a school took up international understanding, it is where the pupils could meet English at elementary school. MEXT introduced a new guideline in 2008 stating that from 2011 Foreign Language Activities (FLA) became a compulsory class in elementary school. The general objectives of FLA is

“To form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences,

fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages. “(Ayako, 2011)

FLA is given to students in Grade 5 and Grade 6, with 35 meetings per year and each meeting lasts for 45 minutes. In its guidelines MEXT (2009) suggests that the instructions should allow the students to actively engage in communication in a foreign language, to experience the joy of communication in the foreign language, to actively listen to and speak in the foreign language and to learn the importance of verbal communication. The emphasis put in learning a foreign language is to develop intercultural understanding.

Besides providing the guidelines, MEXT also provided the student’s textbook named English Note 1 and 2, and their manual as well as its CD and digital teaching material. Since English is not regarded as a school subject, students are not provided with scores.

In its guidelines MEXT mentions the term Foreign Language Activities (FLA) meaning that the schools may choose other foreign languages than English. In other words, English is not officially chosen as a foreign language to be studied at public schools in Japan. According to Butler (2007) the introduction of English education to elementary students in Japan, however, has become a controversial issue as to what content needs to be presented and how often. Another consideration of introducing English education to elementary students is on two ideological conflicts, namely (1) the study of English for practical purposes versus the study of English as an academic pursuit; and (2) assimilation with the world outside Japan while at the same time trying to maintain a distinct Japanese identity.

The introduction of English education at elementary school in Japan has been more than a decade. However, some challenges still prevail and need overcoming. The main challenge is probably about the person who is responsible for the teaching and learning process. The teachers who teach English education at the elementary school are mostly the homeroom teachers. These homeroom teachers are certified in teaching at elementary school but they are not certified to teach English (Kawase, 2011). The schools are allowed to employ native speakers or Assistant Language Teachers (ALT), i.e., those who are proficient in teaching English or who have had experience of living abroad. However, since the classes outnumber the ALTs, the homeroom teachers are urged to handle the classes by themselves.

The educational background of the homeroom teachers which are mostly not in the field of teaching English leads to the lack of confidence in teaching English, especially when it comes to the expectation to speak English like a native speaker. Moreover, in its guideline MEXT emphasizes the introduction of sounds and rhythms of the foreign language during FLA. The delay of introducing English letters to students might result in confusion in the part of the students and the teachers (Ikegashira, Matsumoto, and Morita: 2009). Upon all, what can be learned from the case in Japan is that the program is on the burden of local government but the central government with all attributes to the need of teaching English for young learners.

THE IMPLICATION TO INDONESIAN CONTEXT

Regarding the importance of English as a global language and the need to participate actively in the global interaction the Japanese Government includes English education at elementary school in its national curriculum. However, it is quite clear that in implementing it MEXT tries to be careful so that (1) the program does not fall into another exam preparation, and (2) the Japanese can still maintain their national identity. Thus, instead of making English education as a compulsory school subject, it is treated as a Foreign Language Activities in which the emphasis is not on the teaching of the language but more on building students' intercultural understanding. In addition, Indonesia does not have any problem with the use of Latin alphabet in contrast to Japanese Language with Kanji alphabet. However; the inconsistency of sound and spelling relationship in English suggests that teachers need to handle the introduction of written language to elementary school students carefully.

Concerning the reasons of Indonesian government to exclude English education from elementary school, it would be better if the government design a curriculum for English education at elementary school which is applied nationally. In doing so, the government could set a framework for the teaching methodology and learning materials which enables to do a comprehensive evaluation on the progress of English education at elementary school. This comprehensive evaluation can supposedly be used to enhance the effectiveness of the program and in long terms. In order not to burden the students and to maintain students' national language and nationalism, English education in Indonesia is probably not treated as a school subject, rather as an activity of introducing a foreign language to the young learners.

CONCLUSION

Considering the case in Japan and Indonesia. I would say that English education at elementary school in Indonesia has been through a long journey with some problems and challenges. The idea to exclude English education from the elementary school curriculum may not be a good idea since it obstructs the chance of the students to experience the advantage of learning a foreign in the early age. Also, the increasingly intense interaction of the global world requires its members to be able to communicate using a global language. Concerning the principles of teaching English to young learners and the way Japanese government handle English education at elementary school, it is highly expected that the Indonesian government pay more attention to the teaching English at elementary school for the sake of sustainable development of human resource of Indonesian toward a better life.

BIOPROFILE

Novita Triana is a lecturer in Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan. Her interest is in the teaching English for young learners, especially in its implication in public schools. She is also interested in intercultural communication and its impact on English language teaching and learning. Corresponding: novita_triana@unlam.ac.id / novitatriana815@gmail.com

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