



Assumptions and evidences about introducing English in Indonesian primary schools

Adzanil Prima Septy

Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
University of Bung Hatta, Padang, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The introduction of English to primary school students in Indonesia began formally in 1994, although English language teaching in primary schools in most of Southeast Asian Countries has taken place for decades. This situation may leave Indonesia behind, particularly in accelerating the improvement of human resources as well as the mastery of science and technology. However, there are some assumptions and reasons why the introduction of English in primary schools in Indonesia began at that time. This article discusses the assumptions and evidence underlying the introduction of English in Primary Schools in Indonesia.

Key words: assumptions, evidences, English in primary schools, Indonesia education context

INTRODUCTION

The strong commitment of Indonesia's government to develop human resources is a testimony of Indonesia development. For example, when Indonesia entered its Second 25 Year Long Term Development Plan (PJP II) in 1994/95, the emphasis of development was directed toward human resources development (HRD). The aim of the development has been to attain excellence in mastering science and technology. This emphasis covers all sectors and sub-sectors of national development. For most Indonesians, the quality of human resources is equated to the mastery of science and technology.

With the emphasis on human resource development, English language teaching has received special attention among scholars, practitioners, businessmen, and government officers. This attention is due to the role of English as a means of global communication, and, importantly, the transfer of science and technology. As a result, the mastery of this language is highly sought after. Schools and universities now offer more teaching hours for English among the other subjects outlined in the national curriculum.

English language teaching has a special position in schools. It is, as a language other than the Indonesian language and local languages, compulsory for Indonesian students mainly from lower secondary schools to university level. According to a decree of the Minister of Education and Culture (now called the Ministry of National Education) number 096 of 1967, English is stipulated as the first foreign language for all Indonesian students from lower secondary education to university levels. The main objective of the instruction is to provide students with good command of English so that they are able to participate in various academic activities, most of which are conveyed in English.

Due to the importance of this subject, the curriculum for English is outlined nationally. The curriculum covers, for example, how this subject should be taught and what materials should be used. In the curriculum, more teaching hours for this subject are offered in accordance with the level of the schools (e.g. lower secondary and upper secondary) and the grade (e.g., grade one, two, or three). However, some believe that ELT curriculum is too rigid which may lead to problems in its implementation in the classroom (Jazadi, 1999a, 1999b).

Since English language teaching in Indonesia began formally, there has been a number of curricula implemented for the teaching of this subject. They are the 1968 curriculum, the earliest one, followed by the 1975, 1984, 1987, and 1994 curricula. Each of these has certain emphases and approaches to achieve the objectives of ELT in Indonesia (Nio, 1993:8-12; Huda, 1999:118-125;140). For example, the 1968 curriculum took an audiolingual approach. This approach focuses the teaching on the sentence structures (less on meaning) by oral drilling, reading aloud, and listening. The 1975 curriculum, on the other hand, used mastery learning approach. The mastery learning approach that still considered a structural approach has more focus on pre-tests and post-tests which require additional time. The 1984 curriculum focused on the communicative approach. The communicative approach, which is concerned with speaking and writing, has a focus on reading. The 1987 curriculum also focused on the communicative approach, complementing of the 1984 curriculum. Finally, the 1994 curriculum stresses the meaningful approach. According to Huda (1999:140-7), the meaningful approach shares a number of features of the communicative approach as adopted from the previous curriculum.

In spite of the number of the curricula used over the years, satisfactory results in students' language mastery have not been achieved. This situation leads to the consideration to introduce English to primary school students. The introduction of this subject is considered as an alternative solution to answer the unsatisfactory results of the students' English proficiency. This consideration was based on a number of assumptions and reasons. Although

there was much debate at that time, mainly questioning the readiness in allocating the subject in the primary education system (Kompas on-line, 1996a, 1996b), the introduction of English in primary schools have been approved. Therefore, this article discusses the assumptions and evidences that underlie the introduction of English to primary school students.

IDEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The first assumption that underlies ELT in primary schools in Indonesia relates to ideology. Ideology is usually a reflection of thoughts and interests. In terms of ideological assumptions, ELT in primary schools in Indonesia will reflect national, as well as local, thoughts and interest toward the mastery of the language as a means of development.

There are at least three factors that may be considered in the ideological assumptions. These relate to the new act of national education system, the Second 25 Year Long Term Development Plan (PJP II), and the act of regional autonomy. These factors are explained below.

(a) National Education System Act

In 1989, the government of the Republic of Indonesia issued an act of education replacing the old act. This new act is called the National Education System. This act is intended to adjust the educational system throughout the country in order to achieve and accelerate the national development objectives. The focus of the new education system is intended mainly to meet the needs of, and to adjust education with, the development of science and technology.

One of the main aspects considered significant in the new system of education relates to curriculum. In the new system, the schooling system is divided into three levels and the curriculum is designed according to the level that it is taught in. The three levels of education are basic, high, and higher education (Ministry of National Education on-line, 2000).

In particular, the curriculum for basic education integrates the curriculum for primary and lower secondary schools as a continuum. The curriculum in primary school covers six years and the lower secondary school covers three years of education programs. In total, the basic education curricula cover a nine years education program. In the previous system, the curricula of primary and lower secondary schools were applied separately.

In terms of English language teaching (ELT), the English curriculum is linked to include ELT in both primary and lower secondary schools. In the

previous system of education, English was only offered in lower secondary schools, and lower secondary school was not a part of the basic education system. Since the new education system has been implemented, primary and lower secondary schools are included the level of basic education, and English in lower secondary schools is therefore a continuation of that taught in primary schools.

However, in primary schools, English is offered as an elective subject. As an elective subject, the schools may introduce this subject if they have the available resources (decree by Ministry of Education No. 060/U/1993 and 1994 Curriculum). The rationale for this condition is that the special teachers needed for this subject in the primary schools are not always available, and some time is needed to train and to provide qualified teachers (Kasbolah, 1992; Nio, 1993:25)

Besides, English is categorized as a local content subject. A local content subject means that the subject should be relevant to local needs and regional conditions (Djojonegoro, 1993:15-19). Therefore, ELT in primary schools should be based within a local-based curriculum. The national curriculum only mentions a general guideline of ELT orientation. Presumably, this act has had a broad impact on the area of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia.

(b) Second Long Term Development Plan

The introduction of English to primary school students may also be relevant to the National Long Term Development Plan (PJP). This National Long Term Development Plan is calculated every 25 years. In 1994/95, Indonesia entered its Second Long Term Development Plan (PJP II).

The first Long Term Development Plan (PJP I) was from 1967/68 to 1993/94. In this plan, development was focused on agricultural sectors. In the second Long Term Development Plan, the emphasis is directed on human resources development (Huda, 1999:134). This emphasis was decided upon with the realization that agricultural industries cannot develop without appropriate qualified human resources. Moreover, the implementation of the Asian Free Trade Area (AFTA) has pressured the government to accelerate the improvement of human resources. It is believed that Indonesians will be a competitive power and be able to compete with other countries by having qualified human resources. For these reasons, English is seen as the instrument to develop the quality of human resources as well as to participate in the AFTA.

(c) Regional Autonomy Policy

The introduction of English in primary schools is perhaps more evident in relation to the deregulation of educational policies. The deregulation of educational policies is a result of the regional autonomy policy. Every region or province has wide ranging autonomy to manage its development.

In 1999, the government of the Republic of Indonesia issued an act, number 22, concerning regional autonomy and in 2000 an act, number 25, concerning the role of provinces as autonomy regions. This policy has been followed by the amendment of the 1945 constitution. The constitution states that most of the policies and decisions of the developmental sectors are deregulated to the regions and every region has wide authority to determine its regional development. The issuance of this policy was as a result of the political reform occurring after the fall of the new order administration that centralized most developmental policies.

In the educational sector, in particular, the regional government has wide autonomy to determine educational policies. Accordingly, regional education should meet the regional characteristics, needs, and conditions. This autonomy includes many aspects of education, including curriculum, in particular, the curriculum of local content subjects (Kompas on-line, 2000).

However, such regional components of the education system should refer to the national characters as reflected in Pancasila, the five national principles. The national characters, the five principles, consists of (1) Belief in God, (2) Humanism, (3) The Unity of Indonesia, (4) Democracy, and (5) Social Justice.

In the context of English language teaching, the deregulation of education policies has stipulated the introduction of English in primary schools as an elective and local content subject. The deregulation reflects the empowerment of every region to direct its ELT objective and manage ELT practices more practically. Moreover, regional governments are also empowered to determine what is taught according to the local characteristics and needs, and to optimize the use of potential resources for industries they need to develop. This may lead to a constructive competition of human resource development among regions.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Another assumption that underlies the introduction of English in primary schools relates is the age factor. Accordingly, the younger a learner learns a foreign language, the better s/he is in producing the language. Younger learners have a special capacity to learn a new language. According to the innatist hypothesis, children have a better innate capacity to develop basic

language structure by using language acquisition devices (Richards et al, 1987:142). Similarly, Bialystok and Hakuta (1999:176) state that younger learners are better than adults in learning a language because their brains are specially organized to learn language.

Besides, children also like to learn something new because of their nature. Naturally, children like to do something by playing and having fun, fantasizing, being creative, and learning something indirectly (Halliwel in Murdibjono, 1995:174-5;). Sinaga (1997:174) identified some facts about children. According to him, children like playing and moving. When compared with adults, adults are reluctant to behave like children. This situation may make language easy for children to learn because they are learning through play. This implies that English language teaching should also be conducted in accordance with the nature of the children (Septy, 1996:26).

Although many scholars disagree that the age factor may make it easier for children to learn a language (Suyanto, 1997:166-70; Huda, 1999:135; Marinova-Todd et al, 2000), this factor has been considered significant in determining the success of English language/foreign language learning in primary schools. In addition, there are several other factors that should be taken into account. These factors may also determine the success of the introduction of English in primary schools. The factors are, among others, motivation, language aptitude, learning strategies, socioeconomic background, and importantly the quality of the teachers. Therefore, studies on the issues need to be conducted.

PRACTICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Another assumption that also underlies the introduction of English to an earlier stage of education refers to the question of second language (L2) Similarity or Familiarity. L2 similarity refers to the linguistic similarities between the first and second language (L1 and L2 structure similarity). According to Ellis (1994:28), if the L1 and L2 system are similar, there will be a positive language transfer. Language transfer is the use of the first language system in the second language context (Ellis, 1994:711; Gass and Selinker, 1994:333). This means that L2 learners will learn the L2 easily because the L2 and their L1 system are similar.

On the other hand, L2 familiarity refers to the learners' familiarity of language(s) other than their native language (L1). In this sense, children have a familiarity with languages other than their own native language. Then, the familiarity with L2 may therefore be assumed to support L2 learning.

Since an early age, Indonesian children are exposed to languages other than their mother tongue. For example, they are familiar with the Arabic language, a foreign language that is used in Islamic teaching. Indonesia is the most populous Moslem country. From pre-school levels, children are introduced to the Arabic language mainly through reading and accurate pronunciation in reciting the Holy Al Qur'an. Therefore, children are able to read and pronounce Arabic as a foreign language. This suggests that children will be able to learn English as a foreign language in which the language system is different from their mother tongue.

Moreover, children may also be familiar with other languages used in the society. Indonesia is a multilingual and multicultural country. It has a great number of ethnic groups which each has its own mother tongue. There are more than 350 local languages spoken in the archipelago and approximately 300 local languages have been recognized (Huda, 1999:ix). Each of these languages is different in terms of the sound systems, words, sentence structures, and accents. Children may understand some of these languages other than their mother tongue although they may not be able to speak them.

In West Sumatran society, for instance, there are at least four ethnic groups and each speaks its own local language. They are (a) Minangkabau people, (b) Tapanuli people, (c) Kerincians, and (d) Mentawaians. The Minangkabau language is the majority in the province and spoken by about 4 million Minangkabau people. Tapanuli people speak the Batak/Karo language and most of this group comes from near the northern border. The Kincai language is spoken by Kerincians who come from the southern border of the province. Mentawaians who live in and around the Mentawai islands on the West Coast speak the Mentawai language. These local languages (the mother tongues) are called the first language and acquired from early childhood.

Children may be familiar with these local languages although they may not use them in their own social interactions. However, this situation gives them the opportunity to recognize these languages through social interactions at schools. For example, these local languages are used in the instructional contexts until grade 4 in primary schools when Bahasa Indonesia (or Indonesia language) is afterwards learned.

In spite of the children's familiarity with languages other than their mother tongue, there is no evidence that this helps the second or foreign language acquisition such as English. However, such situations have contributed to the idea that children in primary schools will be better learners of English, although further study is needed to prove this. Therefore, this practical aspect has motivated scholars, practitioners, and the authorities to accept the introduction of English in primary schools.

RESEARCH EVIDENCES

A number of studies in the area of English language teaching have been conducted. However, the results have not showed satisfaction in relation to the contribution and evidence of students' good command of English. Moreover, there are quite a few studies in the area of English language teaching in primary schools. Several studies have investigated different contexts of ELT practices and local-based curriculum orientation. Therefore, comprehensive studies into the introduction of English in the primary schools need to be undertaken.

In spite of that, a few studies in this area may be considered relevant. Several studies have found that ELT in primary schools was not to be successful, while others showed successful practices of ELT in primary schools. For example, Lubis (1996), in her study in Jakarta, found that primary school teachers encountered difficulties in using communicative methods in their English classrooms. According to her, the teachers could not make students actively involved in classroom interaction. However, Mursalim (1996) found that primary schools teachers in Malang, East Java were successful in using available and commercially produced English textbooks as their prominent sources to run the teaching, although the teachers still encountered some difficulties in using these resources due to the unavailability of textbook manuals for teachers. In terms of classroom activities, Mursalim found that the teachers mainly used a question-and-answer technique on grammatical points to make their classes work. These findings imply that different settings of the study give significant results of ELT in primary schools and contribute to ELT management. The East Java teachers were probably better in using resources to run the classroom activities than Jakarta's teachers who were supposed to have complete facilities.

Moreover, in terms of teaching methods, teachers' use of reading stories seemed to be effective, particularly in improving vocabulary and grammatical items in classroom activities in primary schools. As suggested by Murdibjono (1997:179-91), the use of stories may be the best way for teaching the primary school students. However, her suggestion needs to be further examined in order to identify how teachers make use of stories and develop interactive activities in the language classroom.

Similarly, in examining the use of a shared book technique in reading stories, Rachmajanti (1999) found that teachers using the shared book technique improved students' mastery of vocabulary and grammatical aspects. However, her study also raised some questions about whether or not the students' vocabulary and grammatical competence reflected their ability to communicate in English in real contexts. Moreover, she does not clearly

state how the classroom activities work in reflecting the effectiveness of the technique so that her findings can be used as a model of classroom management in different contexts of teaching. Her study still leaves a question unanswered as to which teaching and learning resources are best suited to primary school students.

In West Sumatra, one of the provinces in Indonesia, Septy's study proposed a model of teaching and learning activities in primary schools. However, this study was limited to theoretical discussions of ELT in primary schools (Septy, 1996). An evaluation or study to ascertain the effectiveness of this program in the region needs to be undertaken. For example, a comprehensive study of the teachers' role in implementing strategies to use teaching and learning resources in facilitating students' English language learning in the primary schools is needed. The study may include an exploration of the way teachers manage the English classroom, looking at, for example, how teachers created activities, how they select and use teaching and learning sources, and how the students use vocabulary and grammatical items naturally in communication.

TEACHER FACTORS

The introduction of English in primary schools has taken place in the attempt to accelerate the improvement of human resources. However, there are a number of problems with this action. The primary research concerns should be directed to the teacher as the key factor in the classroom. In relation to that, then the role of educational institutions and teachers training institutes in facilitating the teachers' duties should also be taken into account. These all relate to the role of teachers because they are the main factors in the success of English language education in primary schools in Indonesia

This situation assumes that the teacher is the primary resource in the teaching and learning of English in the primary school classroom. However, most English language teachers are non-native speakers of English. If they are considered as the primary resources in the classroom, this situation will be problematic in the area of ELT in Indonesia.

Most English teachers only have some in-country training in English language teaching at their teacher training institutions and universities, and few of them have overseas training. As non-native English speakers, teachers are facilitators, and they have to facilitate the students in their English language learning. According to Harmer (1996:235-6), as a facilitator, the teacher attempts to maintain a low profile to make their students' own achievement of a task possible. Therefore, in this situation the

teachers should be able to select suitable and appropriate resources to facilitate the students' English language learning.

In doing so, the teachers may employ certain strategies to optimize classroom activities such as using various teaching and learning sources. This leads to the question of how do teachers employ their strategies to use the teaching and learning resources to facilitate the students' English learning in the classroom, and what do they think are the students' sources for learning. In other words, what strategies the teachers use as their teaching resources may be considered the key factor to determine what is best for the students' learning. This area needs to be comprehensively studied.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of English in primary schools has been taking place in Indonesia since 1994. There were many controversies surrounding the policy to introduce the language at this level of education. However, due to the need to accelerate the development of human resources as the key factor for the transfer of technology and science, English language teaching in the primary schools has been accepted and undertaken by considering a number of assumptions.

This article has tried to explore and discuss the assumptions that underlie English language teaching in primary schools. The assumptions are classified as ideological, theoretical, and practical assumptions. The ideological assumptions refer to the national education system, long-term development plan, and regional autonomy. The theoretical assumption puts age as a determining factor in making it easier for children to learn English in primary schools. The practical assumption relates to the children's familiarity with languages other than their mother tongue.

The evidence of several studies has also been reviewed. The research highlights the evidence of the important role of teachers in determining the success of the teaching. This then leads to the recommendation for the need to comprehensively study teachers teaching this subject in the primary schools.

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