

The Effectiveness of English Education at a Public Elementary School in Indonesia in Enhancing English for Young Learners

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Abstract The role of English as a wide-reaching means of communication has led early English education becomes more prevalent in today's world. This present research aims at finding out the effectiveness of English education at a public elementary school in Indonesia. Besides the English teacher, the fourth, fifth and sixth grade students of a public elementary school located in Bandung, Indonesia, were the participants. An English proficiency test is administered to see whether the English ability of students in higher grade is better than the lower ones. Through questionnaire, further investigation was also done to know the students' perceptions towards English as a subject at school. The findings of this study revealed that students' English score did not show a significant difference among grade four, five and six. Varied answers of students' responses towards the English teaching were also recorded. Hence, the results are expected to give valuable contributions on the implementation English education, especially English for Young Learners (EYL) that can be beneficial for English teachers and other related stakeholders, so that it can keep developing and the English ability of Indonesian students can be further improved.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the aims of introducing English as a global tool of communication as well as motivating the young learners to learn a foreign language, English has been included as an elective subject at elementary schools in Indonesia—it is offered as a local content subject which its implementation depends on the school's readiness, particularly with the teacher resources, learning resources and curriculum (Hanawati, 2011). While private schools have their own authority to use and construct school curriculum based on the school's characteristics, the public should follow government rules—in this case, English subject at public elementary school is given once a week for each grade for 70 minutes a week. However, each schools vary in starting giving the English subject, although most of the public elementary schools start with the fourth graders, some begin from the first or the second.

In fact, the status of English subject taught at primary school level as a local content undeniably impacts on the way teachers teaching the students—teachers of English at elementary schools seem to face unavoidable challenges in conducting the class because of many factors. Different from the English

teaching at secondary school, the goals of teaching English at elementary school are unclearly formulated and considered to be more to teachers' own beliefs and pretension. As elementary school teachers are assigned as homeroom teachers, not subject teachers, they are given responsibilities to teach all subjects at their assigned classroom. It occurs also to English teachers who have to teach other subjects besides English. Moreover, as English is not tested in the national examination at elementary schools in Indonesia, the teaching and learning of English becomes less demanding—the subjects included in the national examination are given more time and attention. Furthermore, a stern misconception among the elementary English teachers (Musthafa, 2010) and some other related stakeholders in considering English teaching to young learners does not necessitate the same English competences as English teaching at a higher level has also directed to misinformed program implementation.

It cannot be denied that the blurred guidelines for English teaching at primary level might potentially mislead English teachers in conducting the teaching and learning activities. Different from English teaching at primary level in Japan that has set the

focus on aural language (Katsuyama et al., 2008; Butler & Takeuchi, 2008) in Indonesia, the objectives are still hazy, and it has been acknowledged that the implementation is still controversial (Setiasih, 2012). This indirectly affects the teachers in making decision to choose appropriate materials, teaching strategies and assessment.

The misconception about teaching young learners also influence teachers in conducting the class—many spend most of the allocated time for assigning the pupils to do the exercises on the workbook. As English subject is given only once a week for 70 minutes, how can meaningful learning occur when students are busy spending the time to do the exercises? How can students be motivated in learning English when interesting and meaningful learning is not provided? As many suggest that to draw students' engagement, it is required for the teachers to implement ways to create learning which is relevant, authentic, and valuable in students' lives, evocative learning ought to be provided so that students are encouraged to enjoy studying and triggered to be engaged in the classroom activities.

As English teaching at the primary level is decentralized (Musthafa, 2010) and the curriculum for English subject is not provided by the central government, these have created the loose guidelines that actually may bring positive impacts to teachers to be explorative and creative in conducting the class (Tomlinson, 2003; Harmer, 2001). The status of English as an elective subject and as it is not tested in the national examination provide opportunities for teachers to create materials based on their needs, preferences and views. Then, it always finally depends on the teachers themselves whether they want to spend extra energy and time to prepare teaching materials based on their creativity and conduct meaningful activities. In this case, the school can take a part in supporting teachers by working together with the teachers set and adjust the objectives of English teaching based on the local needs, so that guidelines can be formulated and class can be designed to achieve the goals (Sundayana, 2017; Richards, 2013 & 2001; Yuwono, 2005; Harmer, 2001; Brown 1995).

Furthermore, as local content subject, English textbooks are not provided by the government like other subjects where the electronic ones are available and teachers can download the files of the book free at the website address www.bse.kemdikbud.go.id. Consequently, often teachers use any books and resources available for them to support the English class—the books could be the ones used for years by the previous classes or those that school can afford to

buy which do not always meet the needs of the students. Thus, besides teachers' low English proficiency, teachers' overloaded duties, teachers' misconception about teaching English for young learners, and other unsupportive variables, the role of government support becomes one of the handicaps of English education at public schools in Indonesia, especially at the elementary schools.

Even though English education is given since primary level, studies conducted by Larson (2014), Marcellino (2008) and Lie (2007), depict that most of the students in Indonesia graduate from senior high school with low English skills despite studying English since primary to secondary level. Dealing with this, it cannot be denied that the lacks towards the teaching and learning English elaborated above could be the causes of those results. Regarding their findings, the current research was intended to do the investigation on the effect of English education at public elementary school in Indonesia by comparing the students' English achievement. Students of grade four, five and six were tested to see whether higher graders achieve higher scores and if there is significant difference of overall students' scores.

The consideration of limiting the participants of the research into three higher grade at elementary level which are the four, five and six graders, and not including the first, second and the third ones is because many public elementary schools start giving English education from the fourth grade. This is supported by Suherdi (2016) who posits that it is suggested that English can be introduced to young learners at grade four when they have their mother tongue and national language reinforced. Scott et al. (1990: 4) add by depicting that children in the age of eight to ten have gained the basic foundations of a language as they have been good at their mother tongue and aware of the statutes of syntax in L1. Thus, it can be concluded that the decision of seeing the English achievement of grade four, five and six is appropriate.

Dealing with the background above, the problems of the study are stated below:

1. How different is the English performance of three different grade students?
2. How do the students perceive English as a subject at school?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In teaching English for young learners, it is required that stakeholders consider the characteristics of the learners that are formulated by Scott et al. (1990) as

follow: 1) children's own understanding comes through hands, eyes and ears. They consider physical world dominant at all times; 2) their logic comes first; 3) they cannot sit and study too long as their attention and concentration span are short; 4) young learners like playing and working individually but still need others as companions; 5) they need explicit explanation about why they are asked work with others; 6) they need to be given clear explanation about the work they need to do; and 7) as they love to play, the activities designed for them should be enjoyable so that they are interested to participate in the class.

He also specifies the general individualities of children aged eight to ten year olds (1990: 3), they are: 1) they have their own perspectives about world; 2) they know the differences between fiction and non-fiction; 3) they like to question a lot; 4) they relate what they hear and see to gain meaning; 5) they have capability to decide something; 6) they see the alternatives and have preferences; 7) they have become critical about the surroundings; and 8) they can cooperate with others. Bruner (1996) enhances by formulating three modus related to how children learn, they are: (1) enactive—they tend to do activities on things, like: folding paper, sticking the pictures and other things that do not only include words; (2) iconic—mental pictures that gained from the experiences, that is why the activities in the class are designed in the forms of purposive games; and (3) symbolic—holistic learning should be provided by relating to their life context.

In this present study, the above elaborations support the consideration of limiting the participants of the research into the four, five and six graders only. It is supported by Suherdi (2016) and Scott et al. (1990: 4) that young learners starting from grade four have their mother tongue and national language reinforced, they also have gained the basic foundations of a language as they have been good at their mother tongue and aware of the statutes of syntax in L1.

In Indonesian context, the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language was firstly offered in 1994 (the Decree by Ministry of Education No. 060/U/1993 and 1994 Curriculum). Based on this regulation, a school has authority to include English subject as a local content by considering the recent conditions of schools, parents and society. The purposes and goals of elementary English teaching according to the Ministry of Education are 1) to develop learners' basic skills of English communication in school contexts, 2) to encourage learners' attention in English class, and 3) to extend

learners' viewpoint toward the prominence of learning English to improve their competitiveness worldwide.

The implementation of English teaching at the elementary schools in Indonesia is quite similar to what is applied in Japan. Katsuyama et al. (2008) write that in Japan, where the English education is behind the other Asian countries, English has been given at elementary school as an optional subject since 2002. The research that they conducted was aimed at finding the effectiveness of early English education and to decide whether English should be given formally in public elementary schools in Japan. By administering test and a set of questionnaires to 1466 students of elementary school twice—in 2004 and 2005, findings were found that there were major differences between students who had English at their primary school and students who did not. These undeniably show the positive effects of the English learning to students at the early stage and hence, encourage their interests in it when entering higher level of education.

However, there are some differences on how the government take a part in the English education between Indonesia and Japan. At the primary level, Indonesian government do not interfere too much as the English education is decentralized (Musthafa, 2010). On the other hand, Japanese Ministry of Education take a part by making policy decisions as an experiment basis on curricula, instructional methodology and assessment. Butler & Takeuchi (2008), at their research, identified the factors that most toughly affect students' performance in English learning at the elementary school in Japan. 6,541 elementary school students who had obtained many kinds of English instruction in Japan were given a test namely STEP Silver Test. The results revealed that grade levels and occurrences of teaching gained outside of schools appeared to be good predictors among others. Based on the findings, an hour extra lesson of English was also very beneficially influential.

Another related previous study was done by Nikolov (1999) who looked at the attitudes and motivation of Hungarian children between the ages of 6 and 14. In his long-term study, he investigated why the students think they study a foreign language, how they relate to school subjects and what classroom activities they like and dislike. From the findings, he concluded that causes of motivation were found to vary at different ages. He confirmed that although the importance of instrumental motivation increases with age, engagement and persistence in learning activities are not directly influenced by this factor as children

will choose to pay attention to, engage and persist in learning tasks only if they find them worth the trouble.

From what had been done by the previous researchers and regarding the problematic matters that occur in the English teaching and learning at elementary schools in Indonesia, therefore, a study is intended to be conducted to find out the effectiveness of English education students receive at the elementary schools. An English proficiency test is administered to see whether the ability of students in higher grade is better than the lower ones and whether students study at different schools gain different achievement of English skills. Besides, a questionnaire and in-depth interview are also directed to figure out the factors that influence the results of the test.

3 METHODOLOGY

This present study employed mixed-methods by collecting and analyzing quantitative data gathered from test and qualitative data gained from the questionnaires then interpreting the results into qualitative study (Creswell, 2003).

3.1 Participants

This present study included 162 students of grade four, five and six at Public Elementary School 195 Isola, Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. The school has given English subject to the students from grade two to six. Two English teachers are assigned to teach English classes besides teaching other subjects. The participants that include four, five and six graders are considered representative to signify the sample as many public elementary schools start giving English education from the fourth grade. This is based on what is recommended by the government to start the English education at elementary school from grade four (the Ministry of Education and Culture Decree No. 060/U/1993) and also recommended by Suherdi (2016) and Scott et al. (1990: 4) related to the students' readiness to learn a foreign language. Thus, it can be concluded that the decision of seeing the English achievement of grade four, five and six is appropriate.

3.2 English Test

Different from other country like Japan that conduct the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) which is a-TOEFL-like test, Indonesia do not have the

kind of test which is accepted in the national forum; so that a test should be constructed. To support the study and to reliably determine the attention of the proficiency test contents, English test was developed based on the rubric of school examination of English for grade six in the previous year which refers to the Standard of Elementary School Outcomes. The test consisted of thirty number of multiple choice questions and was designed to be done in 60 minutes. The contents covering the materials of English taught from grade four to six.

3.3 Questionnaire

After the test scores were analysed, a questionnaire which was adapted from Katsuyama et al. (2008) and Nikolov (1999) was administered to the participating students to gather auxiliary information for further investigation. The questions were set in Bahasa Indonesia and including the following items: (1) What are your first three favourite school subjects?; (2) What are the school subjects (if any) you dislike?; (3) What do you enjoy doing the most in English classes?; (4) What do you dislike (related to English)?; (5) If you were the teacher what would you do differently?

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results of English Test

As stated in the previous section, the test created for this study consisted of thirty numbers of multiple choice test questions. The students were divided into three groups based on their grade, which are grade four, five, and six. The table below shows the mean scores of each group.

Table 1: Mean Score of English Test.

Grade	4	5	6
N	54	53	55
Mean	41,05	41,3	53,15

From the Table 1 above, the mean scores which the students achieved in the test can be known. From 162 participants in total, 54 of them were students of grade four, 53 were students of grade five and 55 were students of grade six. It can be seen that minor difference was found among the three groups, especially between the fourth and fifth graders which is only 0.25. The mean score of the sixth graders, although it was the highest of all, still shows trivial difference from the other two groups which was not

as expected. It differs 12.1 from the fourth graders group and 11.85 from the fifth. From these findings, it can be assumed that the length of time the students learn English at school does not significantly affect the students' English achievement. Thus, further investigation is undertaken to find out the underlying factors of the test results by administering the questionnaire.

4.2 Results of Questionnaire

A questionnaire that contained five open questions administered in Bahasa Indonesia was filled out by 30 out of 162 students. This number was gained from 10 students of grade 4, 10 students of grade 5, and 10

students of grade 6. Other criteria in choosing the participants for filling out the questionnaire was the students whose scores were on the top 15 and the lowest 15.

The first and second questions were aimed at finding out the place of English among other school subjects. When seen from the students' grade, slight different was found that the results expose overall interest towards English as a subject learned at school. The findings shown in Table 2 present the irregular pattern where it can be assumed that the students' grades and the length of time they learn English do not affect pointedly to students' preferences towards English as a subject at school. Table 2 shows how students in different grade placed English as a subject among other subjects at school.

Table 2: The Position of English Subject Based on Students in Different Grade.

Grade	N	English First	English Second	English Third	English not in the top three	Dislike English
4	10	1	5	3	1	0
5	10	1	2	0	7	2
6	10	2	3	1	4	0

However, different pattern was found when the groups of students were modified into two groups based on their test scores. More students in the top 15 group like English than in the other group. Only two

of low score listed English as one of the subject they dislike. Table 3 shows how students with different test scores placed English as a subject among other subjects at school.

Table 3: The Position of English Subject Based on Students with Different Test Achievement.

Group	N	English First	English Second	English Third	English not in the top three	Dislike English
Lowest	15	0	4	2	9	2
Top	15	4	6	1	3	0

From these findings, it can be referred that students who like English tend to be more motivated in learning English that indirectly, affect their learning achievement.

Hence, the third and fourth questions sought to draw detailed information concerning classroom activities. The students' answers varied based on their grade. The fourth graders mostly listed the factors that they are keen on in English class, like: the teacher, the songs, the games, and the pictures. They responses by writing that they loved being with the English teacher who was kind and helpful. One student wrote that English subject is not too difficult, that is why she liked it. Eight students left the fourth questions in blank and two other answered by writing that they hated English subject when the teacher gave too many exercises to do.

Grade five students tended to answer the questions number 3 and 4 by mentioning about the

materials they had learned in English class. Six out of 10 students wrote the topics that they likes best, which are about family and time. The other four students mentioned that they enjoyed English learning vocabulary and having the conversation for the class activities. Most of them also did not answer the fourth question. Only two who wrote that they did not like learning the topic about hobby without mentioning the detailed reasons.

Compared to the other two groups, the students sitting on sixth grade had stated their goals of learning English. 50% of sixth grade students revealed that as English is an international language, they gained more knowledge by learning the language. It can be assumed that the higher grade students have been more likely to identify the sense of usefulness of English, while the lower ones tended to mention the things that attract them to study English, like: the patient teachers, the songs and games and the

interesting materials. These are in line with the findings of the study conducted by Nikolov (1999) and Katsuyama et al. (2008).

The final question asked for suggestions and criticism from students' perspectives. In general, most of the students in all levels wrote that they would not change anything the way their teachers teach. They would teach patiently, help the students who face difficulties, and explain the materials clearly. Very meaningful suggestions were given by students in grade 5 and 6, like: they would conduct outing class and relate the place to the theme being discussed, apply appropriate strategies to make students understand the materials easily, and designing attractive activities so students would not get bored. From these results, we can conclude that higher grade students who are assumed to learn English longer, have seen how to study English effectively and have been able to express what they think beneficial in English learning.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study show that young learners are motivated in English class if they find the interesting activities and materials and the teachers are kind and helpful. Another imperative finding revealed in this study is the fact that the percentage of classroom and teacher-related reasons lessened with age. Students' in higher grade have been aware of the goals of studying English as an international language which later will be beneficial and able to give concrete suggestions for the teachers in conducting the class. Finally, similar to Nikolov's findings (1999), classroom implications relates to the way causes of motivation were revealed to vary at different ages.

For students in lower grade who are younger, classroom activities should be designed with fun to engage the students in the class. The teacher is also the centre who determines how the class objectives can be achieved. For students in higher grade, more challenging activities in terms of the tasks, the materials, and the assessment, are required to be done so that they will be more challenged and gain the worth of learning a foreign language.

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