
Teaching English to Young Learners in Indonesia: Essential Requirements

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ABSTRAK

Sejak pemberlakuan kebijakan desentralisasi pengelolaan pendidikan pada tahun 2001, banyak pemerintah daerah (PEMDA) memutuskan untuk mengajarkan bahasa Inggris sebagai “muatan lokal” (mulok) di jenjang Sekolah Dasar (atau bahkan di TK). Inisiatif PEMDA ini problematis karena pemberlakuan mulok ini tanpa dibarengi dengan upaya khusus penyiapan guru bahasa Inggris untuk mengajar di SD. Artikel ini membahas profil guru bahasa Inggris yang diperlukan dengan mengajukan lima persyaratan utama: mengerti hakikat anak; mengetahui bagaimana anak belajar; mengetahui bagaimana anak belajar bahasa; mengetahui bagaimana anak Indonesia belajar bahasa Inggris; dan mengetahui dan mampu memfasilitasi anak-anak yang sedang belajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: TEYL; English Teaching in Indonesia; English Literacy; EFL Pedagogy; “local contents”

Decentralization of education in Indonesia has encouraged local governments to make their own decisions relative to some portion of curricular space in the form of the use of some learning hours for what has become known as “local contents” (Jalal & Musthafa, 2001). As result of this decetralized decision-making, since last decade, public interest in English for Young Learnes (EYL) has become enhanced. This is evidenced in increasing number of district and city governments all over the country which offer English classes at the elementary school level. While decisions to teach English to elementary school pupils have been made, requirements for teachers to be able to teach English well at this level are seldom discussed in public fora. As results, our knowledge about this important issue is very limited.

To make things even more worrisome, from day to day observation we can easily find cases which indicate that elementary school English teachers lack professional support and opportunities for in-service training. In addition, the current practice seems to have been guided by a very serious misconception—that is that teaching English to elementary school children does not require the same English proficiency as teaching English at a more advanced level. If not appropriately rectified,

this mis-informed program implementation is bound to failure.

This article shall bring to fore what accomplished teachers of English to young learners should know and be able to do so that program planners have a relatively clear understanding of all the components necessary to create a positive environment for English teaching and learning at elementary school level in Indonesia. More specifically, using current learning theories stemming from socio-cultural perspectives (e.g., Vygotsky, Bruner, Corsaro, and Dyson) the bulk of the required knowledge base and skills has been synthesized from multiple sources and these requirements will be organized into five pillars relative to (1) who children are, (2) how the children learn, (3) how the children learn a language, (4) how Indonesian children learn English as a foreign language, and (5) how teachers can facilitate children learning English as a foreign language.

Requirements For Effective Teaching of English to Young Learners

Pillar #1: Accomplished teachers of English should know who children are

Curtain and Dahlberg (2000) claim that effective language instruction builds on topics

and contexts that are relevant to the learners. Consistent with this thinking, Luke as cited in Barratt-Pugh & Rohl (2000) suggests that unless the learners' experiences are taken into account, teaching methods, texts and assessment practices are inappropriate. It is therefore critical that teachers know who their target learners are before they can design a good English instruction.

Who are the children? Review of both theoretical treatise and research-based reports which are underpinned by socio-cultural theories--which strive to understand children from children's own perspectives—will lead us to a clear conclusion that children are children—not little adults. As repeatedly shown in peer culture studies (see, for example, works by Corsaro [1985]), children have their own culture—ways of doing things—which are different from that of adults. Given this thinking, children should be treated and appreciated in their own right.

If we want English teaching to work as expected, it should first of all be ensured that teachers hold an appropriate perspective about who children are because almost all pedagogical decisions the teachers would make stem from this perspective.

Pillar #2: Accomplished teachers of English should know how children learn

The works of Bruner (1996) and later works of Piaget (1975) have provided very useful insights into how children learn. More specifically, Bruner (1996) proposes a hierarchy of children's learning modes: *enactive* (which means relying on physical activities), *iconic* (which represents residual mental images resulting from the contacts with material entities), and *symbolic* (which comes later by way of symbolic means such as language).

Parallel to these three modes of learning, Piaget (1975)—as cited in Chaile & Britain (1991)—contributes another helpful concept. That is, three kinds of knowledge children create from their engagement with physical objects and social intercourse. More specifically, according to Piaget, there are three kinds of knowledge: *physical knowledge* (which children construct out of their "interaction" with physical objects), *logico-matematical knowledge* (i.e., basic concepts children *acquire – as a mental residue--* from their actions on physical objects), and *social knowledge*

(the kind of knowledge children "receive" from social interaction with other members of the culture).

From these hierarchies of learning modes and kinds of knowledge constructed by children—and based on other theoretical constructs and research-based propositions as well—socio-cultural perspectives propose learning principles, including the following: children learn from direct experiences; children learn from hands-on physical activities; children's thinking is embedded in here-and-now context of situation; children learn holistically from whole to parts using scripts; and children have a short attention span.

(1) Children learn from direct experiences.

Unlike adults—who can generally learn from decontextualized abstractions—children learn and create knowledge base from direct experiences: from what they can capture using their senses, and from what they experience directly. This learning principle has a great implication for topic choice and materials development by the teachers. For instance, rather than trying to engage children into the idea of playing foot ball (or soccer) during winter time—which they generally do not experience in their lives in Indonesia—teachers of English could involve the children in talking about their favorite activities during the rainy season. In this way, the learning of English makes a better sense to learners because this foreign language can serve a real purpose: talking about things they think important in their lives.

(2) Children learn from hands-on physical activities

Different from the way adults learn whereby abstract, virtual experiences can be digested in such an allegedly easy way, young children's learning is greatly enhanced when the learners are engaged in hands-on physical activities such as playing with physical objects or making physical movements. This learning tendency has a great implication for instructional design. That is, rather than using seat work all the time, for instance, a teacher of English would help her students learn better if she has the learners do things in English (such as creating posters with captions in English) or do things with English (such as negotiating field trip plans in English). In this way, English instructional activities become more varied and engaging to young learners.

(3) *Children's thinking is embedded in here-and-now context of situation*

Common in classes of young learners are learning activities related to the identification of colors and shapes of objects. Teachers of English often complain about how time consuming it is to prepare teaching scenarios and create learning media.

Given that children's thinking tends to be embedded in what is happening right now and what can be experienced on site, it would make a better sense if the teacher capitalize on the colors she can spot in what students are wearing and using and use this as a basis for the learning activity. The same procedure can also be adopted for the topic of shapes of objects.

In this way, the teaching and learning of English can serve a real purpose, and this will, in turn, increase children's learning motivation because they can see for themselves that English is useful.

(4) *Children learn from whole to parts – holistically-- using scripts*

As suggested in the learning principles discussed earlier, children create knowledge by accumulating what has already been experienced case by case. From this kind of experience, children develop scripts which serve as a kind of "organizer" for digesting their ensuing experiences. Take "eating in a restaurant" as an example. Using their direct experience as a guide, children would construct the eating-in-a-restaurant- script as coming in-> making an order-> being waited on-> eating -> paying the bill (and then) -> leaving.

This initial script will later be revised with more details if the children experience having a meal in "all you can eat" restaurant where customers help themselves; or when dining at the expense of another person (i.e, "being treated" by another person) where the bill is taken care of by the other person.

Given this way of learning, children would get facilitated if the English instruction builds on what children know rather than on what is likely new to them. In this way, thinking in the foreign language would be limited only in terms of vocabulary items—not in the concept they do not have.

(5) *Children have short attention span*

Unlike adult learners who can concentrate hours and hours on the topic they are working on, children can hold their attention for about 15 to 20 minutes only. This relatively short attention span has a great implication for teaching procedures. That is, rather than using a large time block for an uninterrupted session, it would be better to divide the time block into several smaller chunk of activities where children are engaged in different, smaller chunks of learning activities. This means that teachers of English should use various teaching techniques for shorter periods of time to avoid boredom on the part of students, while—at the same time—pay close attention to teaching items being targeted for each fraction of the sessions.

Pillar# 3: Accomplished teachers of English should know how children learn a language.

Parallel with the ideas discussed earlier with regard to ways of children's learning, young learners acquire a language from direct contact with language in use, including observing and participating in literacy practices; watching how people read and write for functional real purposes; and participating in literacy events. In other words, language skills are acquired naturally in the context of meaningful oral interaction and literacy events (Wagner, 1989). In addition, children learn a language by doing things in and with the language (e.g., participating in social activities involving the use of the language; being engaged in social interaction using the language being learned).

Consistent with the above described thinking, and following ideas proposed by the leading proponents of Whole Language such as Frank Smith, Ken Goodman, and Gordon Wells, Musthafa (2001) proposes three dimensions of learning a language: exposure to the language (where learners get exposed to language in use which can serve as examples to learn from), engagement (where learners get opportunities to use the language for communicative purposes), and consistent support (where the learners see for themselves that learning the language is useful;and the language they learn is socially recognized as prestigious). These three dimensions should be there if the learning of a language is to be effective as expected.

Pillar# 4. Accomplished teachers of English should know how children learn English as a Foreign Language

The status of English as a foreign language in Indonesia and as “local content” in elementary school entails extra hard work for teachers. This is so for at least three reasons. First, English as a Foreign Language means that the language has no/or very limited function in social intercourse in Indonesia. Learning English with no clear social function can pose a real challenge to teachers because the student learning motivation can be low and the exposure to the language use outside the class can be very limited. Second, English as local-content means very limited contact hours: two to four hours only per week. This very low frequency of instructional encounter virtually precludes skills development on the part of learners. Third, as the decision to teach English to young learners is not complemented with a systematic preservice and inservice training, the teaching of English to elementary school children means a “perfunctory” activity and this can put teachers’ reputation on the line.

Curtain & Dahlberg (2000) reminds us that teachers who cannot comfortably use the target language for classroom purposes will not be able to surround learners with the language—an essential component of an effective language learning environment. And this kind of English teachers are more a rule than an exception in Indonesian elementary school context (see Musthafa, 2001)

Pillar# 5: Accomplished teachers of English should know the principles and should be able to do things to facilitate children learning English as a foreign language in Indonesia

As exposure to English in use is very limited outside of the classroom, teachers of English should use English all the time/or as much as possible during the session in the classroom. To support the idea of increasing exposure to English use, print-rich environment should also be created in and around the classroom.

As children learn more readily when engaged in physical movements, teachers should use activity-based teaching-learning techniques such as TPR, games, and projects. Also to be noted here is that teachers should focus on functional English

for vocabulary development, and for immediate fulfillment of communicative needs of the young learners.

As children have relatively short attention span, teachers of English should use various techniques for short periods of time to maintain the interest level of the children in engaging the English lessons. Also noteworthy is the idea that teachers should reiterate often to ensure the acquisition of English.

As classroom English (or language of classroom interaction) is relatively distinctive in nature, it is good idea if the teachers can provide useful acquisition-promoting routines in English so that—as a collective—children in the classroom can acquire relatively significant amount of functional English simply by being present in the classroom.

Proposed good classroom practices

First of all, it should be made clear here that effective teachers of English are those who can fluently use English for functional communicative purposes, including for instructional purposes. With their good command of English and skills in using the language for communication, the teachers can serve as a role model to the learners they teach.

To reiterate important points mentioned previously, what follows are seven suggestions to “save” the decision already made by the district governments so that the teaching of English to young learners can function as expected.

1. English is to be used all the time to ensure that children have relatively much exposure to English

In order to expose students to English in use—which represents an essential prerequisite for the acquisition of English to happen—teachers of English should English all the time/or as much as possible in the classroom during the instructional sessions. Teachers of English model the acts of speaking, reading and writing by speaking, reading, and writing themselves while the children try to do so. This functional use of English during the instructional time should be carried out consistently to provide learners with opportunities so that they can see for themselves how English is being used for communicative purposes with their teachers.

In this way, children can observe and participate in the use of English for communicative purposes, and then acquire this language in use as a prototype for later use in other communicative events.

2. *Print-rich environment in English should be created in and around the classroom.*

Create a learning environment rich in multi-modal literacy artifacts. Provide the room with ample functional reading and writing materials in English such as brochures, leaflets, circulars, posters with captions written in English, comics, magazines, dictionaries and encyclopedias so that functionality of English is visible to the children in the classroom.

3. *Teachers of English for young learners should use activity-based teaching-learning techniques such as total physical response (TPR), games, and projects*

Use activity-based activities teaching techniques such as TPR, games, and projects (see, for instance, Katz & Chard, 1989). Learning how to use English is accomplished when children use the language to learn about the world; the focus is on the subject matter (e.g., games they like most; favorite activities during the rainy season, etc.).

4. *Teachers of English for young learners should use various techniques for short periods of time to maintain the interest level of the children in engaging the English lessons*

Use various teaching techniques for short periods of time to avoid boredom on the part of learners. At the same time, keep focus on the teaching items from one instructional move to another so that children's learning is ensured.

5. *Teachers of English for young learners should focus on functional English for vocabulary development, and for immediate fulfillment of communicative needs of the learners*

Always use functional English during the instructional time in the class so that children can acquire functional vocabulary items from your talk and their communicative needs get fulfilled. In doing this, encourage children to speak up their minds by proactively soliciting their responses and anticipating their vocabulary needs so that genuine communication can take place.

6. *Teachers of English for young learners should reiterate often to ensure the acquisition of English expressions or vocabulary items*

Reiterate useful vocabulary items and expressions as frequently as they are contextually appropriate. The more frequently they encounter words and expressions in the context of genuine communication, the easier they would find them to acquire. Do this activity consistently and you will learn how speedy your students pick up the language and use it in their talk and writing.

7. *Teachers of English for young learners should provide useful, acquisition-promoting routines*

Create routine activities which are rich in language use such as reciting prayers in English together before getting started with English sessions, engaging students in small but authentic social talks as an ice-breaker before delving into the topic of the day, and having children do "show and tell" on a weekly basis.

As part of a regular instructional "menu", have a shared book reading and talk about the book you collectively read in the classroom regularly. Research has established that shared book reading helps children develop many of the skills essential for eventual reading achievement (see, for instance, Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; and Neuman & Dickinson, 2001).

In addition, children's language and vocabulary development is enriched by exposure to books. Reading books aloud creates a rich language environment that stimulates children's interaction with rare and useful vocabulary or more sophisticated language than is ordinarily found in mere conversational exchanges. Children learn new words from books especially when books are reread multiple times. Children build their understanding of stories from the stories they hear (see, for instance, Neuman & Roskos, 2007).

Conclusion

From the discussion on each required knowledge base and skills for accomplished teaching, we can see components of expertise for effective teachers of English for young learners—which have thus far never been articulated publicly in Indonesian academic discourses.

In the discussion of these components of professional expertise of teachers of English, there are crucial implications for both preservice and in-service teachers training programs, which have not responded adequately to the changing needs in the field of teaching of English. Furthermore, those training programs are expected to create effective teachers with a good command of English and skills in using the language for communication, and an ability to act as a role model to the learners they teach

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