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## The Urgency of Designing National English Curriculum for Elementary School in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

To propose the idea of designing national English curriculum for elementary school in Indonesia, a literature review as a research methodology in this study was conducted to reveal the urgency of teaching English to young learners, based on a number of previous studies on this issue, as the preparation for the future generation facing the era of globalization. The fact that English is the language of world trade and technology has benefit the countries in which English is taught since Elementary level with their national standardized curriculum, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei to grow rapidly. Contrast to their conditions, In Indonesia, although there are many positive responses from the society about introducing English since elementary school, based on National Curriculum 2013, the government has just allowed schools to teach English since junior high school. As a result, there are great numbers of elementary schools start teaching English to their students without necessarily developing proper curriculum or even having qualified teachers. Therefore, providing national English curriculum for elementary school is strongly required to give teachers and schools clear guideline and proper standard to teach English at early stage. It is expected that proper and nationally standardized English curriculum will help teachers and schools to teach English according to the student needs and capacity and build strong foundation for learning English on the next stage.

**Keywords:** *National English curriculum for elementary school, young learners, National Curriculum 2013*

### INTRODUCTION

English has been widely regarded as the world's language that makes more people learn this language to fulfill their needs of getting involved in numbers of international fields. As English has constantly been spreading around the world as a global language, it is no longer a language restricted to countries where it is spoken as the first language (mother tongue). Its spread is obviously seen in Southeast Asia, a sub-region of Asia which includes eleven multiethnic, multicultural and multi-language countries (Vu, 2014). As a response on this issue, Graddol, (1997) states in (Rachmajanti, 2008) that great numbers of non-native English speaking countries have made changes in their public policies, such as lowering the age at which English is taught in schools, such as introducing English as a subject in the school curriculum in the elementary level.

Looking at experiences from other countries definitely will be useful to have the best possible success in implementing teaching English in elementary level. Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei for years have already included English as their second language, used altogether with their native language. Even to make sure that their young generations can communicate properly in English, the governments have stipulated this language as a compulsory subject in all levels of education, including elementary schools. Those countries have utilized English as the constructive language for the nations without leaving their identities as countries with indigenous languages.

What about Indonesia? Contrast to Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei that have regarded English as their second language, Indonesia is even still in struggle of taking English as the compulsory subject in elementary school. English language teaching has then undergone numerous changes in its curriculum since the country's independence and brought no significant impact upon the learning outcomes. Although, in fact, primary English provision in Indonesia has started in 1994 in which English has the position as *the local content subject* in the elementary schools (Supriyanti, 2012), serious attention is still not taken due to its position in the curriculum. Since it is only a local content subject, the provision needs no specific methodology, no specific techniques nor appropriate materials and media. There has been no standard in how the English provision should be handled, therefore the result cannot be expected to help improving the quality of the English provision in the higher educational levels

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(Supriyanti, 2012). The similar cases repeated in every new curriculum launched by the new government, in which English has never been a priority for elementary schools. To make it even worse, the current 2013 curriculum implemented now in every school in Indonesia has removed English as the local content and take it slightly only as extracurricular activity.

Indonesia government needs to take English as the compulsory subject for elementary schools and design its curriculum. Countless research has shown children's natural talent to absorb foreign languages should not be wasted. It is scientifically proven that the most effective age for learning a foreign language is 10 or under (Saputra, n.d.-a). Thus this literature review of study is conducted to encourage the government and all stake holders of education in Indonesia to start the English teaching at the elementary level more seriously and designing its curriculum.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Based on the review of previous literatures, this study is trying to build the proposal of designing national English curriculum for elementary schools in Indonesia. There are two aspects pertinent to the discussion of the paper; curriculum 2013 and the context in which English teaching in primary level situated in Indonesia and teaching English to young learners. A number of previous research also support this study.

#### *Curriculum 2013 and the context in which English teaching in primary level situated in Indonesia*

The practice of English was no longer only limited to international purposes but also local communication. In the countries that take English as their second language, English becomes the medium of communication among the people from different level of society. In the level of international interaction, most people choose English as communication medium which is generally known as English as a Lingua Franca. Unlike other countries, Indonesia took a different stance by putting English as its foreign language while neighbor countries such as Filipina, Singapore, and Malaysia view English as the second language (Gunantar, 2016). In education field, in fact, Indonesia is the only country in Southeast Asia that has not made English a compulsory subject at elementary level. As a result, based on the data from English First (EF) an education institution that runs English courses all over the country, Indonesia is ranked lowly 51 out of 88 countries in English proficiency, lagging far behind Singapore (3), the Philippines (14) and Malaysia (22). We are even outclassed by Vietnam (Saputra, n.d.-b). In line with this, based on the results of the study English proficiency Index (EPI) 2016, Indonesia got ranks 32<sup>nd</sup> of 72 countries in the world. The figure represents a decline from 2014. These results of the research demonstrate that the quality of English proficiency still needs to be improved.

It is hard to find the use of English in daily conversation in Indonesia. In schools, for many years English subject can only be found as compulsory subject since in junior high level. Yet, it is only taught approximately for four hours a week and focus mostly on preparing the students for the test rather than building their communicative skills. For elementary school level, until the last type of curriculum namely KTSP (*Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pelajaran*) English was only admitted as local content subject that schools can take it as an optional subject. Then, the current K- 13 curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*) finally removed English subject from Elementary school and leaved it only as part of the extracurricular subject (Arif, 2015).

There are a number of changes in 2013 curriculum that bring significant impact towards the process of teaching and learning in elementary level. The new curriculum will focus on character development for elementary school students, skill development for junior high school and knowledge building for senior high school (Madkur, 2013). Then, Mulyasa (2013) in (Madkur, 2013) wrote some changes in 2013 curriculum for elementary level that distinguish it from previous curriculum. They are:

1. Thematic-integrative: The learning teaching process will be done based on theme. It means some subjects are combined into one based on the theme.
2. Eight subjects: There are ten subjects in the previous curriculum, but in the 2013 curriculum, the ten subjects become eight subjects. Namely Religion, Math, Indonesian, social, science, civics education, arts and skills (local content), and physical education (local content).

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3. Boy scouts as compulsory extra- curricular subject.
4. The learning time will be longer

**5. *English is only as extracurricular subject***

Talking about English just as extracurricular Subject, or in other words, it is omitted from intra curricular subject, former Deputy Education and Culture Minister, Musliar Kaslim (2012) in Koran Sindo (2012) said that the omission aimed to give ample time for students to master the Indonesian language first before diving into foreign languages. His statement is in line with a number of people who agree with the removal of English from Elementary level. Sepyanda (2017) states in her studies that some people who agree with this situation believe that Elementary School students should focus on learning the national language (Bahasa Indonesia) related to their nationality by which the students should pay more attention to Bahasa Indonesia as their first language than English as foreign language.

A number of previous studies have shown that the interest in English teaching in primary schools is vastly growing in Indonesia (Zein, 2012). Various research have reported that parents would only send their children to study in a school that offers English instruction, while the local offices of the Ministry of National Education authorized primary school principals of schools that do not teach English to offer English instruction for prestige reason. Entering the new millennium, there was another increasing interest in English within Indonesian society. Parents in many parts of the country were aware that the increasingly globalized world meant that strong preparation in English education would be vital in the coming years. Furthermore, parents also believed in the importance of elementary English education for early language acquisition (Chodidjah, 2008; Lestari, 2003; Rachmajanti, 2008) as cited in (Zein, 2018). Parents believed in the notion ‘the earlier the better’, that is, the value of an early start and the advantages it offers to children as they learn to acquire a foreign language. They further assumed that elementary English education would contribute to the development of a more positive attitude and higher motivation toward the language among the Indonesian workforce of the future. It is no surprise that during the early years of 2000, there was a tendency for parents to enroll their children in a school that offers English (Zein, 2018). Therefore, school principals feared that numbers would decrease if they failed to respond to it, so they offered English instruction. Some even lowered the level at which English was introduced into the curriculum to as early as Grade 1. This particular responds show that the 2013 curriculum does not answer the demands both locally and internationally. In local context, the 2013 curriculum does not accommodate the demands of the parents who want their children to study English since elementary level. In international context, English has been required strongly to support the young generation facing the global world, thus, the 2013 curriculum should respond to this urgency.

Postponing English education until secondary education denies macro- policy factors that have contributed to the conception of elementary English education (Zein, 2018). Elementary education should be viewed as an important stage in education process that will determine the quality of the next stages. The demand of Elementary English education is overwhelmingly strong, and the support among parents for its implementation has never ceased (Egar et. Al., 2011; Hawanti, 2014; Lestari, 2003; Zein, 2009) as cited in (Zein, 2018). Since there is strong emergence of English demand among parents of students in elementary school level, Indonesia government should respond this in no more delay.

***English Curriculum for Young Learners***

*Curriculum*

The term curriculum refers to the lessons and academic content taught in a school or in a specific course or program. In dictionaries, curriculum is often defined as the courses offered by a school, but it is rarely used in such a general sense in schools. Depending on how broadly educators define or employ the term, curriculum typically refers to the knowledge and skills students are expected to learn.

Curriculum of teaching English for young learner is different from teaching English for adult. English for young learner is not as complicated as adult, for example, children do not comprehend abstract ideas such as grammar. Bourke (2006) as cited in (Pransiska & Pd, 2016) notes that young learners do not have a concept of ideas such as parts of speech, discourse or phonology. Any attempt to explain these abstract concepts at an early age will likely serve only to confuse them. In addition, from an early age, children first begin to sort out words involving concrete objects. When introduced to L2 classroom, they “need very concrete vocabulary that connects with objects they can handle or see”, states Cameron (2001) in (Musthafa, 2010). In contrast, adult learners are able to cope with abstract ideas. Therefore,

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teaching English for young learner has to avoid teaching grammar and focus on about vocabulary. Reading and writing are also suspended until appropriate age to introduce English literacy.

#### *Teaching English for Young Learners*

In teaching young language learners, Pinter (2006) in (Pransiska M. Pd, 2016) points out a number of reasons why children can benefit from learning a foreign language. It can develop children's basic communication abilities in the language. Communication abilities need to stimulate as early as possible. Teaching English also encourages enjoyment and motivation for language learning especially when it is in fun way. In addition, children can also promote learning about other cultures and develop children's cognitive skills as well as develop children's metalinguistic awareness.

Regarding the teaching of young learners, in this study refers to the students of elementary school, the teachers need to understand the concept of acquisition and learning. Acquisition is a process of acquiring the language naturally or sub- consciously. On the other hand, learning is a process of having the language consciously (Krashen and Terrel (1983) in (Saputri, 2017) state that acquiring a language is "picking it up", i.e., developing ability in language by using it in natural, communicative situations. Children acquire their first language, and most probably, second language as well. Language learning is different from acquisition. Language learning is 'knowing the rules', i.e., having a conscious knowledge about grammar. According to recent research, it appears that formal language learning is not nearly as important in developing communicative ability in second languages as previously thought. Therefore, in line with children's development and the two concepts above (acquisition and learning), the teaching of English to young learners at elementary school requires situation in which the students acquire abilities by means of acquisitions rather than learning. It means that the students acquire language naturally and communicatively.

Children are not little adult, instead, they have their own ways of doing things which are different from that of adults. In this way, they should be treated and appreciated in their own rights. To make English teaching work as expected, the characteristics of children related to the way the learn language need to be considered before designing proper English curriculum for elementary level.

Concerning how children learn, a number of researcher have provided very useful insight to understand about this matter. Bruner (1996) as cited in (Musthafa, 2010) 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). Adding to these concepts, according to Piaget in (Musthafa, 2010), there are three kinds of knowledge children create from their engagement with physical objects and social intercourse: *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*.

Based on these hierarchies of learning modes and kinds of knowledge constructed by children, an Indonesian researcher Musthafa (2010) proposes certain learning principles in his study. The principles include 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; and children have a short attention span. Another principle is proposed by (Saputri, 2017) that is children learn through language chunks.

#### *1. Children learn from direct experience*

Children learn and create knowledge from direct experience: from what they can really see, touch, listen and feel, simply from what they experience directly. In their young age, they still cannot generally learn from abstraction. This learning principle has a great implication for topic choice and materials development by the teachers.

#### *2. Children learn from hands-on physical activities*

Children learning process is improved 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.

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

Since 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 topic they learn can easily be seen on their daily

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

#### *4. Children have short attention span*

Different from adults 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.

Another researcher, that is (Saputri, 2017) also proposes another principle in her study that is:

#### *5. Children learns through language chunks*

In learning English, the students need to use language chunks, phrases which have complete meaning. In this way, the students will be able to comprehend language function as a means of communication easily although at first they do not know the meaning of the phrases they use, such as, " Good Morning ", "Good Afternoon ", "Never mind", " Thank you", and so forth.

There are three dimensions of language learning that strongly determine the quality of the learning process (Musthafa, 2010). The dimensions are 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.

### **Review of Previous Research**

A number of Indonesian researchers has conducted some research about English teaching in elementary level. They have already provided strong ground for designing English curriculum.

The first researcher is Subhan Zein (2018) whose study entitled Elementary English education in Indonesia: Policy developments, current practices, and future prospects. His literature study reveals the needs of adopting a holistic view of multilingualism in the Indonesian context that will give impact on teaching materials, which need to allow for the provision of communicative based activities while ensuring the preservation of local culture. It will also have an impact on pedagogy, which needs to change its current test-orientation to a more communicative and culturally inclusive pedagogy that raises awareness of the use of English as a global language and builds confidence in the linguistic repertoire and cultural diversity occurring in the classroom.

The second researcher is Marcellino (2006) who concerns about the challenge of language teaching in Indonesia. The title of his study is English Language Teaching in Indonesia: a continuous Challenge in education in Education and Cultural Diversity. His study reveals about the complex linguistic situations and conditions in Indonesia. How the students cultural backgrounds, values, customs, and beliefs as well as the political standpoint of the government determine the success of English teaching in Indonesia. He also mention the substantial unconstructive influence of the students' cultures and the non-conductive language environment affecting their language acquisition regarding this English. Finally, the teachers' performance and class preparations that equally contribute to the ineffective classroom.

Based on the review of previous literatures, this paper is trying to build the proposal of designing national English curriculum for elementary schools in Indonesia, including some practical recommendation concerning its content.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

For the investigation, this paper uses literature review method. Reviews of research literature are conducted for a variety of purposes. They include providing a theoretical background for subsequent research; learning the breadth of research on a topic of interest; or answering practical questions by understanding what existing research has to say on the matter (Okoli & Schabram, 2010). The main references used are concerning curriculum 2013 and the context in which English teaching in primary level situated in Indonesia and teaching English for young learners. Scientist journal print edition, on line edition and articles are gained from the internet. The writing was pursued the interconnection between each components according to the topic discussed. The data were selected and sorted according to the

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topic. Then they are arranged logically and systematically. The data analysis technique applied in this study is descriptive argumentative. The conclusions were obtained after referring back to the statement of the problem, the purpose of writing, and discussion. Conclusions were drawn to present the subject of writing, and supported with practical suggestions as subsequent recommendations.

Today, English has an undeniable global status, which is used either as a mother tongue, a second language, or as a foreign language in every continent of the world. Especially in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), English functions as an Asian and international lingua franca. It has become a medium of communication among groups of people who do not speak the same first language. As a response to this issue, most countries in Southeast Asia have taken English as their second languages, actively used together with their various mother tongues. They take English as a compulsory subject in all level of education, including elementary level.

Not to be left behind other countries, Indonesia government needs to pay more attention on English teaching in Indonesia. First strategic step is by including English as a compulsory subject for elementary schools and provide the national English curriculum to strengthen its implementation. These are the crucial reasons why the provision of English is strongly required since elementary level.

1. The widespread assumption that the younger the child learns a new language the better the result will be. This is in line with the majority of parents in Indonesia who support the English teaching in elementary school and the scientific research which proves that the most effective age for learning a foreign language is 10 or under.
2. The fact that economic globalization has pushed the demand of English in the form of the workforce who speak English to meet the need of the international economic forces. This also has been realized by the three countries, Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore, reviewed previously. Thus, they take English as their second language to attract overseas capital, trade, industrial investment, to gain access to advance technology and modernization. To equip their citizens with proper English skills, they have stipulated English as compulsory subject since elementary school. In fact, among southeast countries, Indonesia is the only country that has not made English a compulsory subject at elementary level.
3. The parents' enthusiasm for their children to learn English early in order to have social and economic benefit in the national context. In fact, English has a crucial role nowadays. To graduate from university, to get scholarship, to apply for jobs and even to apply for civil servant, Indonesian needs English scores, in the form of TOEFL, IELTS, TOEICs or others. Further, to walk through the international gate, it is indispensable for Indonesian to speak one foreign language, especially English. With the ability of communicating in English, young generations will have better opportunities to access more prestigious careers and professions that eventually help them to have social and economic benefit.

### **Proposed recommendation for the English curriculum design for elementary school**

Here are some recommendations built from the previous discussion concerning the design of English curriculum for elementary school.

1. Indonesia government has to stipulate English as the compulsory subject for elementary school. Only through this way, English has strong position in elementary school education and deserves the design of proper curriculum to be nationally implemented over the nation.
2. The curriculum designed for elementary school should be relevant with the children needs, stages of learning process, the characteristics of children and the next curriculum of junior high school. This is to ensure that English learning process in elementary level can be a strong foundation for learning English in the next level. Thus, English learning process from elementary school until senior high school can become a solid continuation learning process that eventually build students communicative skills in English.
3. The government needs to provide in service training for English teachers in elementary schools. This training is required to prepare teachers knowledge and skills before implementing the curriculum into the classroom learning activities. Through this training, the teachers will have acquired knowledge and skills related to teaching young learners, approaches and methods of teaching, educational

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philosophies, teaching practices ,testing and assessment, and exposure to English teaching materials related to English for young learners.

Regarding the design of English curriculum for elementary level, based on the theories of children language teaching, this study proposes four basic principles that should be included within it.

*The curriculum should encourage children language acquisition rather than language learning.*

As mentioned previously, children acquire the language, not learn. Exposure represents an essential prerequisite for the acquisition of English to happen. Therefore, the curriculum has to provide the lesson and academic content that provide learners with opportunities to acquire the language rather than learning it.

*The curriculum should focus on functional English for vocabulary development, and for immediate fulfillment of communicative needs of the learners.*

Children learn through language chunks, words by words, phrases by phrases. Then they will construct their knowledge in their own way. Their learning will be strongly enhanced when they can feel English is related to their contextual needs. Therefore, the curriculum should provide the lesson and academic content that help students acquiring functional vocabulary items for their communicative needs. For example, in speaking practice, the curriculum content should encourage children to speak up their minds by supplying them with vocabulary and phrases, that suit their ages and needs so that genuine communication can take place. By doing so, learners can feel that learning English is useful and that English is related to their real life.

*The curriculum should contain short periods of time of lesson and academic content to maintain the interest level of the children in engaging the English lessons*

Since children have a short attention span, rather than using a large time block for an uninterrupted session, it would be better if the curriculum contain short periods of time of lesson and academic content to maintain the interest level of the children in engaging the English lessons. This is done to avoid boredom on the part of learners while at the same time, keep focus on the teaching items from one instructional move to another so that children's learning is ensured.

*The curriculum should provide the lesson and academic content that give learners the opportunities to engage with English language usage in accordance to their real life*

Children learn from direct experiences; children learn from hands- on physical activities, therefore the curriculum should supply children with the lesson and academic content that provide opportunities to engage with language usage that is in line with their daily life. For instance, supplying children with the topic of body parts, classroom objects, and family members that involve actively communicative activities will help students to engage with language usage that is suitable with their real life. Then, these will strongly improve learners' language foundation for their learning process on the next level.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

"English is a global language", "English is an international language", or "English is a world language" – these are headlines which have appeared in thousands of newspapers, magazines and books in recent years. Nowadays, the majority of English speakers in the world are not native speakers of English but use the language either as a second language or as a foreign language. English was spreading rapidly in non-Western countries as an "additional language" and "alternative language" in such multilingual societies as Southeast Asian countries, in response to the demands of modernization and technology. Therefore , a high priority placed by Southeast Asian governments on the teaching and learning of English stems from the necessity of English for the development and modernization of their countries through making English as compulsory subject since elementary schools.

As part of the world community, Indonesian government should have made a big leap to ensure that Indonesia would not be left behind in a world that was rapidly becoming globalized. Stipulating English as compulsory subject and designing English curriculum for elementary school should become a new priority for the government to be realized. The curriculum designed for elementary school should be relevant with the children needs, stages of learning process, the characteristics of children and the next curriculum of junior high school. To support the implementation of the new English curriculum, the government needs to provide in service training for English teachers in elementary schools.

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Regarding the design of English curriculum for elementary level, this study proposes four principles that should be included within it. First, the curriculum should encourage children language acquisition rather than language learning. Then, the curriculum should focus on functional English for vocabulary development, and for immediate fulfillment of communicative needs of the learners. Considering the ability of children to concentrate, the curriculum should contain short period of time of lesson and academic content to maintain the interest level of the children in engaging the English lessons. Finally, the curriculum should provide the lesson and academic content that give learners the opportunities to engage with English language usage in accordance to their real life.

It is high time for the government to open the opportunity of starting teaching English at the elementary level to maximize children's natural talent to absorb foreign languages. By giving children the earlier start to learn English, they will have longer time of learning English and absorbing knowledge as well as building English skills. Then, it can be expected that the next generation will have better English skills to communicate with people around the globe and represent Indonesia globally.

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