

Challenges in Teaching English to Young Learners

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Abstract: The consideration of English to be introduced at the earlier age has been arisen, especially in Indonesia. EF EPI in 2018 shows that Indonesia is in the 51st place out of 88 countries which indicates as having a low English proficiency. Likewise, in Asia, Indonesia is placed in the 13th place out of 21 countries which also categorizes Indonesia of having a low proficiency. Thus, it is crucial to teach English as early as possible. However, teachers of EYL all over the world, including Indonesia are facing some challenges in carrying out their profession. In Indonesia, specifically, the challenges or problems come from the status of English in Indonesia, teachers' pedagogical competency, and parents' socio-economic background.

Keywords: *challenges, English for young learners, teaching English to young learners*

Abstrak: Pertimbangan akan pentingnya pengenalan bahasa Inggris sejak dini kini semakin meningkat, khususnya di Indonesia. EF EPI pada tahun 2018 menempatkan Indonesia pada posisi ke-51 dari 88 negara yang mengindikasikan rendahnya kemampuan siswa dalam berbahasa Inggris. Bahkan di tingkat Asia, Indonesia juga termasuk salah satu negara dengan kemampuan bahasa Inggris yang rendah (peringkat 13 dari 21 negara). Oleh karenanya, mengajarkan bahasa Inggris sedini mungkin menjadi suatu hal yang krusial. Akan tetapi, guru-guru bahasa Inggris di sekolah dasar maupun sekolah menengah pertama di seluruh dunia, termasuk Indonesia, kerap menghadapi tantangan-tantangan dalam menjalankan profesi mereka. Terkhusus di Indonesia, tantangan-tantangan atau masalah-masalah tersebut berasal dari status (mata pelajaran) bahasa Inggris di Indonesia, kompetensi pedagogik guru, dan latar belakang sosio-ekonomi para orang tua.

Kata-kata kunci: *tantangan, Bahasa Inggris untuk pembelajar muda, pengajaran Bahasa Inggris pada pembelajar muda*

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Introducing English at an earlier age is important. Cameron (2001) suggests that starting to learn foreign language at the earlier age results benefits to some areas of language skills, i.e. listening comprehension and pronunciation. Curtain (1990) explains that the students who start their language learning in their primary school have a better chance to have a high level of language proficiency compared to those who just start theirs in the secondary school. These are in line with the survey of Policy and Practice in Primary English Language Teaching Worldwide done by British Council (2013) to 66 respondents of 66 countries (including Indonesia) on the demand of teaching English to young learners (TEYL) which shows that one third of the respondents and one sixth of the respondents reveal the policy change of lowering the age of starting English in all or part of the context and making English compulsory at primary level, respectively. That fact reflects a higher demand of English at the initial stage. Besides, it also gives a real depiction that the consideration of English being necessary to be introduced to young learners has gradually been arisen.

In Indonesia, especially, it is crucial that English be introduced at an earlier age. Globally, EF EPI (English Proficiency Index) ranks Indonesia in the 51st place out of 88 countries in 2018. The score of EF EPI of Indonesia is 51,58 which is categorized as low proficiency. In Asia, similarly, Indonesia is categorized as having a low English proficiency – it is ranked in the 13th place out of 21 countries surveyed by EF EPI. There is also a comparison among the provinces in Indonesia which shows that South Sumatera is in the 10th place out of 11 provinces surveyed by EF EPI which also indicates a very low proficiency. It is obvious that Indonesia is left behind compared to other countries. Meanwhile, mastering English is one of the ways for Indonesian young generations to face the global competition. Thereby, English has to be taught as early as possible in order to

make them to master English as their provision to compete globally.

Teachers of English in primary or secondary schools who become the big player beyond this reality will carry out a harder work. At the same time, to run their profession as the teacher of young learners, English teachers in primary or secondary schools might face some significant challenges. Nunan (2010, p.7-12) explains that cognitive development, motivation, attention, multi-level groups, and assessment are the challenges in TEYL. The study conducted by Mejía (2009) in Colombia showed that there were lack of sources in teaching English in the elementary schools as the government was likely to focus on those in high school level. Additionally, Garton (2014) found out that the teachers in South Korea admitted that teaching method, classroom size, and learners' factors (discipline problem, motivation, and mixed level classes) are the problem they faced the most in TEYL. Thus, from the worldwide studies, it can be inferred that English teachers of young learners are indeed facing problems in performing their responsibility.

In the case of Indonesia, similar cases happen. The challenges in TEYL were found in terms of place and implementation that there were three challenges procured from the study conducted by Rahayu (2016) at schools in rural area in Salatiga. Those challenges came from: (1) the status of English subject, (2) the teachers' educational background and competency, (3) the students' socio-economic background. Furthermore, the results of research conducted by Lengkanawati (2005) showed that the problem comes from the teachers themselves– their English proficiency– as only 11 out of 66 respondents who got the score of 500 of TOEFL. There was also a result from the interview with English teachers about the problem they face in teaching EYL that assessment is one of them.

Challenges in Teaching English to Young Learners

Nunan (2010, p.7-12) suggests five main challenges that might be encountered by English teachers of young learners. Those challenges are in terms of cognitive development, motivation, attention, multi-level groups, and assessment. The first challenge is cognitive development. Nunan explains that young learners are in the middle of their psychological and social development from infancy to adulthood. This kind of thing should be very considered by the teachers in designing the tasks and materials. He suggests that introducing the formal grammar and applying inductive teaching to young learner would not be a good decision. In contrast, they should create the tasks and materials which suit the students based on the stage they are at.

Motivation is the second challenge that the English teachers of young learners perhaps face. It is explained that maintaining the students' motivation is crucial. Meanwhile, there are some factors which are able to influence the students' motivation. Objective clarity and relevancy are the two of them. The students will be highly motivated once they know what they are expected to be able to do after learning certain materials as well as the things they could relate to the material are. Dick, Carey, and Carey (2005) reveal that by informing the students about the objectives of the instruction, it will help them both to use an effective learning strategy and to decide the relevancy of the instruction. Consequently, teachers have to be able to provide those two aspects in teaching young learners, including English.

The next challenge is to gain the students' attention. Getting the students attention is the first thing that the teachers should be able to do as children's attention period is limited. Sustaining the learners' attention during the instruction is very important that they are learning in order to perform it (Dick, et al., 2015). In this case, teachers have to vary the activities in order

to maintain the students' attention. Thus, including a variety of learning style into the activities are likely to be a wise decision.

Another problem in teaching English to young learners is in terms of multi-level groups. Diversity in a group of students will lead to a serious problem. The diversity includes different motivation, different learning style, different first language, and especially different proficiency. Therefore, teachers must be able to deal with children with those differences. To deal with the difference of proficiency level, they have to design materials and tasks which are varied in difficulty.

The last but not least is in terms of assessment. Nunan reveals that assessment is needed in order to know how well the learners have done while the most important assessment is the assessment for learning process since assessment is an integral part of learning process. Assessment as an integral part of learning process implies some purposes that the teachers must be able to decide whether the students need direct feedback as the assessment. It is in line with what Halliwell (1992) states that teachers gave more attention on the implementation of content goals rather than on attitude goals which should be prioritized in primary school English teaching. At this point, teachers of EYL should be very competent in assessing the students. Teachers have to be able to develop the students' language instead of focusing the assessment for testing them only.

Worldwide Studies

A lot of studies have provided challenges encountered by the teachers of young learners. Those studies show that teachers of young learners around the world are facing the same matter—they face some challenges in performing their profession. There are some studies from around the world which discussed about those challenges.

The first study was conducted by Mejía (2009) in Colombia. The study was discussing about the gap between the

bilingual policy for the elementary students and the current state of the teaching and learning of English in public elementary schools. In fact, teachers are facing the problem in terms of learning source. It was revealed that the government only focuses on those for the secondary school while elementary schools are suffering from the lack of resources.

The next was about the case of South Korea investigated by Garton in 2014. He investigated the teachers' perception about the challenges they face in TEYL. It was found that teaching method, classroom size, and learners' factors (discipline problem, motivation, and mixed level classes) are the problem they faced the most in TEYL. One of the respondents admitted that there are too much students in the class that the data also showed that the class size in Korea are mostly bigger compared to the global size (with 47% of classes having 21-30 children and 40% having 31-40 children (globally, 30.8% of classes have 11-20 children, 38.4% have 21-30 children and only 13.5 have 31-40 children).

The Case of Indonesia

Similarly, Indonesian teachers of EYL also find some problems regarding to their profession. Yet, there might be some differences in terms of the challenges compared to those in other countries since they are actually influenced by each context. The study conducted by Rahayu (2016) was focusing on the challenges faced by the teachers' in teaching English to young learners in rural public primary schools in Salatiga. There are at least three challenges in TEYL found in the schools. The first is the status of English which is as local content subject. This fact causes a little attention from the government to the needs of TEYL that most schools lack of resources. The second is the teachers' education background and competency. Most of the teachers are not English education graduates and lack of pedagogical

knowledge in teaching English. Yet, they still believe that they can cope with the situation as long as they are provided by the textbook. The last challenge is about the students' socio-economic background. It was found out that most of the parents in village are not concerned with the mastery of English. While the parents in city are competing to send their children to English course to have better proficiency, the parents in village only hand their children's English mastery over the learning activities given in school.

Next, Lengkanawati (2005) conducted a study using qualitative case study which investigated the teachers' English proficiency and their problem in TEYL. She found out that only 11 of 66 teachers who achieve the TOEFL score of 500 while the rest achieved the score in a range of 290-499. It was revealed that teachers have adequate proficiency in grammar yet they lack in terms of listening and reading skills. In line with what Nunan says, from the interview with the teachers, Lengkanawati found out that assessment is the problem teachers face the most. They admitted that they don't have an adequate preparation to cope with the portfolio assessment at secondary level properly.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

From the explanation and cases described above, some conclusions can be drawn. It can absolutely be concluded that teachers of EYL are encountering some problems in doing their profession; it comes either externally or internally. Generally, the problems are dominantly come from the external such as students' motivation, diversity, classroom size, and etc. Yet, the others come from the internal –the teacher themselves – that some teachers are not competent. From the Indonesian cases, the challenges are seen from three different sides, from government, teachers, and parents. In relation to that, some implications are aimed to certain parties, not

only to the government, teachers, and parents, but also to the institution or even the students.

It can be learned that the status of English in the education system does mean a lot. It will affect the sustainability of English teaching and learning itself. The status of English for being the local content subject makes it somehow underestimated by the government. It is normally considered that the government will focus on those which are compulsory to be taken by the students, especially for the subjects that will be examined in the National Examination. As the result, both teachers and students are suffering from the lack of sources in teaching and learning English. It is suggested, therefore, that the government should think over the status of English in Indonesian education system. Since it is based on the curriculum of 2013 – that English becomes a local content subject – the government needs to think of some considerations to bring the status of English back as a compulsory subject.

Furthermore, some recommendations are also aimed to the teachers of English themselves. They have to be sure that they are well-prepared and consider some crucial things to teach English such as selecting appropriate materials accompanied by an appropriate teaching method. Besides, reflecting to the results of studies, it is obvious that EYL teachers are not competent enough in their field – that they do not have a good proficiency of English and do not have an adequate knowledge for some terms in teaching, in this case is in term of assessment. Then, the main suggestion is for the government. In this case, government should be firm in determining some requirements or qualifications of teachers of English, specifically for teachers of EYL). Besides, training programs, workshops, seminars and any other developmental programs are better provided by the government for the teachers in order to maintain their professional,

personal, pedagogical, and social competencies as having a good and adequate source without a competent user, teacher, is meaningless. Hence, government ought to focus on creating and selecting the tip-top graduates to be the teacher of EYL.

Lastly, in response to what is happening in Indonesia, it is recommended for the government to establish the governmental program that is able to facilitate students to learn English out of the school time. One of the ways is by establishing English Club in schools. That English Club will be conducted out of the school time, so it will be an additional English learning activity for the students. This English Club should be free from payment that parents are not reluctant to allow their children to join in. The best solution to make it payless is by including this English Club into one of the extracurricular activities.

Finally, to realize the importance of English to be introduced at the initial stage is not convenient. There are some hardships during the implementation. In Indonesia, the problems are about the status of English, teachers' pedagogical competency, and parents' socio-economic background. Surely, those problems should be taken into account. For the sake of Indonesian bright young generation, government has to provide some solutions to overcome them. Turning the status of English back to compulsory subject (particularly for primary schools), determining qualifications of EYL teachers, providing training programs for EYL teachers, and establishing English Club in primary schools could be some of the ways.

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