BULETIN PENELITIAN

IMPROVING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDONESIAN SCHOOLS

MENINGKATKAN PEMBELAJARAN BAHASA INGGRIS SEBAGAI BAHASA ASING DI SEKOLAH-SEKOLAH DI INDONESIA

Nihta V.F. Liando

Staf Pengajar Pada Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni, Universitas Negeri Manado

Abstract

This article discusses some of the views in improving teaching and learning English as a foreign language in schools in Indonesia. First, this article examines the literature on teaching and learning English at an early age. Then, the importance of curriculum, teachers, methods and materials as an integral part in learning the English language presented. Furthermore, classroom interaction also plays an important role, such as that presented by Johnson (1995:81) that '... the teacher-student Interactions That take place in classrooms cans have impact on students' learning', which means that the interaction between teachers and students that occurred in the classroom can be an impact on student learning. Some important things to be highlighted in improving foreign language learning, including learning English program implementation by considering the advantages of early age through psycholinguistic and cultural outlook, and maximize classroom interactions in order to achieve better results in learning English. Article was written to support the implementation of early childhood learning and teaching English in schools.

Key words : English language learning and early childhood.

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas beberapa pandangan dalam meningkatkan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing di sekolah-sekolah di Indonesia. Pertama, artikel ini mengkaji berbagai literatur tentang pembelajaran bahasa Inggris pada usia dini. Kemudian, pentingnya kurikulum, guru, metode dan materi sebagai bagian yang integral dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris dipaparkan. Selanjutnya, interaksi kelas juga memegang peran yang penting, seperti yang disampaikan oleh Johnson (1995:81) bahwa '... the teacher-student interactions that take place in classrooms can have impact on students' learning', artinya interaksi antara guru dan siswa yang terjadi di dalam kelas dapat memberikan pengaruh pada pembelajaran siswa. Beberapa hal penting dapat digarisbawahi dalam meningkatkan pembelajaran bahasa asing ini, antara lain pelaksanaan program belajar bahasa Inggris usia dini dengan mempertimbangkan keuntungan lewat pandangan psikolinguistik dan budaya, serta memaksimalkan interaksi kelas dalam rangka mencapai hasil yang lebih baik dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Artikel ini ditulis untuk menyokong pelaksanaan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris usia dini di sekolah-sekolah.

Kata kunci: Pembelajaran bahasa inggris dan usia dini.

INTRODUCTION

English known as the language of international world has been taught in Indonesian schools for more than two decades. In the Indonesian school system, the English language curriculum has changed three times. The main reason for these changes is the continuing unsa-tisfactory results of students' English proficiency. The curriculum applied from 1975-1984 was based on the traditional method.

However, during this implementation, the program has not brought satisfied results, changing the curriculum has not significantly improved the outcomes which more or less remain the same. This suggests that it is not only the curriculum which needs to be reconstructed. The point is how to make English more comprehensible to secondary students. There are some actions that can be undertaken. First, we need to consider the implementation of TEFL from the early level of education, that is in primary school, in order to attain better results in students' English proficiency in higher levels of education. It means that TEFL in primary school should be seen as an innovative way in improving TEFL in general. Second, the curriculum has to be flexible meaning that each area needs to be given chances to arrange curriculum which is suitable and appropriate. Third, teacher as the main role in classrooms needs to be well-prepared. They have to be given more attention, motivation and freedom in creating materials which suit the students. Fourth, methods and material are another important factors which will influence the successfulness of the program. These will be discussed in the following sections.

TEFL in Early Education

Since the function of English has become much more influential especially in this globalized era, this part will look at how to improve English as a foreign language program for children as the future of the nation. It specifies in looking at the aspects of children in learning a foreign language.

The issue of how children learn a foreign or second language has been debated by many people over the last two decades. Many studies show that learning in early childhood is better in order to have better performance in language. Both Finocchiaro (1964) and Clyne (1986) agree to say that it is better to start learning language earlier to give chance to learn more which means that the period of language learning will be longer. This is supported by another somewhat controversial result reported by an educational writer Epstein (1977) that children can learn English in a dazzling record six weeks. This drove Bialystok and Hakuta to state that "children do, indeed, appear to be gifted language learners" (1994:51).

At this stage, it is probably more appropriate to discuss the advantages or learning at an early age rather than judging that early age is better than late starter or vice versa. There are some characteristics shared by young learners as defined by Brumfit *et al* (1995) such as:

1) young learners are only just beginning their schooling, so that teachers have a major opportunity to mould their expectations of life in school,

2) as a group they are potentially more differentiated than secondary or adult learners, for they are closer o their varied home cultures and new to the conformity increasingly imposed across culture groupings by the school,

3) they tend to be keen and enthusiastic learners without inhibitions which ol-

der children sometimes bring to their schooling,

4) their learning can be closely to their initial development of ideas and concepts because it is so close to their initial experience of formal schooling,

5) they need physical movement and activity as much as stimulation for their thinking and the closer together these can be, the better.

This shows that learning foreign language at an early age has more advantages than late learning. It means that if we want to improve the English program in schools in Indonesia, we need to consider the implementation of TEFL in primary schools because of some advantages mentioned above.

Looking further into foreign language learning from psycholinguistic point of view it is interesting to discuss its relation to the development of brain. Of course, brain where learning takes place and mind where mental categories are related to linguistics categories are essential aspects besides the personal and cultural aspects (Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). It is possibly accepted that children's brains are designed to learn a language in a way that adult learners can no longer replicate as noted in Bialystok and Hakuta (1994:52). This shows that the critical period in learning language other than first language is in childhood as expressed by Penfield and Roberts (1959:255): "The time to begin what might be called a general schooling in secondary languages, in accordance with the demands of brain physiology, is between the ages of 4 and 10". Many linguists have agreed that the process of acquisition could happen to children who are born accommodated with the so-called Language Acquisition Device (LAD) where language is acquired

like by native speakers until puberty (Littlewood 1984:67). Having seen that there are a range of factors associated with the developing brain, there are also societal or external factors to consider which have an indirect rather than a direct affect on second language learning (Ellis 1994:24). From this psycholinguistic point of view, it is clear that learning a foreign language from early age will give positive impact to learners as the brain is in a conducive condition to support the learning.

The studies done in the second language acquisition area shows that second language learning takes the first language learning as its starting point (Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). The learners usually use their linguistics perspective in acquiring the first language to learn a second language. It is advisable to learn a second language which is not very much different to the first one, as stated by Bialystok and Hakuta (1994:86) that one can learn a second language that is similar to one's native language more quickly than one that is different. To be able to speak like native speakers is one of the reasons why children are called gifted-learners, as supported by Finocchiaro (1964) who defines that childhood is the ideal period to acquire a language based on the reason such as their speech organ is still flexible, lack of feeling inhibition which typical for older learner, willing to communicate with their fellows without feeling under pressure. No matter at what age or how quick children learn a language they will end up as perfectly fluent native speakers (Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). In early age, mental experiences play an important role called sensorimotor schemes (Jean Piaget cited in Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). It is obtained through the senses: pictures, sounds, movements, and textures. Furthermore, if the learning is started from early

age, it will give the learners longer period and more exposure in the language they are learning, the longer the better.

Having discussed about the when and how second language learning take place, let us focus more on the instructed language acquisition which is known as the classroom interaction. There are quite a lot opinion raised of what best to do in classroom interaction. One which is known lately is the possibility of learning 'naturally' in a communicative classroom setting where the learners are given sufficient opportunities to participate in discourse directed at the exchange of information (Krashen, Swain, Prabhu in Ellis 1994). On the other side, Krashen claimed that communicative classroom may not be successful but immersion classroom has succeeded in developing very high levels of second language proficiency (cited in Ellis 1994).

Curriculum

After governmental agencies in the education sector have selected and determined certain language(s) to be taught in formal education, which is defined in the language policy, the next step is to

"determine when in the curriculum the onset of instruction will occur and what the duration of instruction will be and also to determine what sort of proficiency is deemed to meet the needs of the society by the end of whatever instruction can be provided" (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997).

This step is very important in order to gain a clear understanding of what to do. Deciding what goal to be attained at the end of the teaching and learning process is a necessity, although it sometimes happens that the prescribed goals cannot be rea-

lised. Therefore language policy has direct implications to curriculum because to evaluate a curriculum, one always has to refer to the policy.

In regard to TEFL in primary school, if the policy states that this programme is based on certain reasons and the implementation is to achieve the determined goals, then the curriculum should take into account these points.

White (1988) states, "curriculum studies have very definitely taken their place among the concerns of language teaching" although it sometimes happens that curriculum is designed without taking into account its actual practice. This may lead to an inability to apply it in classroom practice where the day to day teaching and learning process takes place. This actual process involves both teacher and learners. This will be discussed next.

Teacher

No matter how good and well prepared the curriculum and materials and no matter how effective the methodology and teaching techniques, without the personnel, it is of little consequence. Teachers, especially in a foreign language learning classroom, play an important role. Macaro (1997) focuses on two aspects of teachers; first, the teacher as a foreigner (speaker of the target language) unable to speak the native language (L1) of the learners, second the teacher as a mediator or facilitator. Although there is no evidence to suggest that native speakers or teachers speaking the target language (TL) make better teachers, Atkinson (1993) states, there is some evidence to suggest that the lesser use of L2 may actually have advantages for students, particularly in the early stages of learning. Teachers are taking on the role of mediator and facilitator when they use oral and written

materials in order to develop receptive skills by exposing learners to the target language (Macaro 1997:60). Therefore, as far as foreign language teaching is concerned, teachers' proficiency in the target language is important. This is based on the fact that more than a half of classroom talk is conducted by teachers. Teachers using target language will increase students' proficiency in the foreign language being learnt.

When teaching language other than the mother tongue, teachers encounter various problems. The problems can be internal or external. The internal problems include teacher's lack of confidence in speaking target language and unstable state of emotion; external problems include teachers having problem with colleagues and family matters. However, to classify whether such problem is internal or external relatively depends on the individual. For some extent, it could be internal for someone but external for another and vice versa. Therefore, to be able to instigate a good teaching and learning process, teachers have to be able to manage themselves if they come across any internal factors as these may affect their teaching performance. The external factors can be solved in a larger scope, for example in discussions with the principal if the problems are administrative or with the colleagues in the same field in the same or different school. Therefore teachers' forums or associations are one place to share experiences as well as problems encountered and their possible solutions.

It goes without saying that teacher is a very important factor in the process of teaching and learning because "effective teachers can help learners to progress rapidly at any level of schooling" (Brumfit 1995). If teachers are well prepared with pre-service training and are provided with new information in in-service training, it will result in something positive and successful.

Classroom is the complex place when language learning takes place. Not only do learners in a class come from various background they also have different purposes for learning language, for instance. Thus, in order to conduct a good teaching and learning process it is necessary for teachers to recognize the ability of each student in the same class. There are several types of students in learning foreign languages. Richard-Amato (1988) distinguishhes several levels of proficiency from the *low-beginning* to *the high advanced student*. The recognition of these levels of learners' proficiency might assist teachers in dealing with students. This may also be useful in determining the approach, methods and technique to apply in classroom practice which can cater the range of different types of learners.

The implications of language policy for learners is very obvious. Whether or not learners should learn languages is regulated in the policy. Schools can not just offer such programmes without any reference to policy because it involves other aspects such as curriculum, methods and materials. Every aspects in classroom practice should always refer to the policy.

Besides teacher and learners, the learning process also involves methods and materials. Without applying suitable methods and appropriate materials, it is difficult to promote learning and to achieve a satisfactory results. The next section will observe these two aspects.

RESEARCH AND METHODS

Methods and materials have an important role in teaching and learning process. Having been able to recognise the conditions

for learning, it is appropriate to indicate and determine the most appropriate methods and techniques. It is obvious that for young learners "intonation, gesture, facial expressions, actions and circumstances all help to tell them what the unknown words and phrases probably mean" (Halliwell 1992).

RESULT AND DISSCUSSION

The child's world is the world of play. Being able to realise this characteristic is important because it can be used as a bridge to attract their attention in learning language. Games are so useful and so motivating, not just because they are fun but because the fun element creates a desire to communicate and because games involve unpredictability (Halliwell 1992, Baldauf and Rainbow 1992). It would be helpful to take into account the reality that children's interests are closely related to imagination and fantasy.

Each of the range of methods used in language teaching mentioned previously has its advantages and weaknesses. Therefore to attain maximum benefit of each method is to use them in combination by considering our needs and purposes. Especially in language learning, using one single method only will not help but combining methods as long as it is in need would be helpful for teacher as well as learners. Again, the policy usually determines or suggest through its technical instruction which methodology can be employed in the FL programs. However, it is better to give more freedom and opportunities for teachers to be creative as long as this does not violate the curriculum.

Materials are another essential ingredient for consideration. Higgs (1982) notes that the area, in which the teacher and the curriculum come into closest contact, is in the selection and use of textbooks and related materials. It is undeniable that the textbook, especially in foreign language classes, is central to the process of teaching and learning. It is a major resource for both teacher and students. However, to some extent the content of textbooks is often found inappropriate for use in class. If we look back at the early days before textbooks become a ready-use book, we could see why it happens. It is because of the making of textbooks can sometimes seem chaotic since it involves two parties, the author and the publisher, both with different goals. In terms of teaching foreign languages, the author's first goal is to advance the profession and improve the state of the art by providing teaching material that facilitates the study of foreign languages, while the publisher's primary goal must be to market a profitable product (Higgs 1982). Therefore, compromises must be made to reach the production stage. This is the reason why textbooks are found insufficient and adjustment is needed to meet the learners' needs.

There is a range of textbook available for learning. However, we need to select those which meet the policy criteria. The selection of the appropriate textbook is not an easy task. We realise that there is no single textbook which accommodates all needs. Therefore, the teacher plays an important role in choosing the textbooks which are in accordance with the curriculum and the needs of the learners. Even when the textbook is carefully chosen, teachers must adapt the textbooks to suit the needs and ability of the students. We have to always bear in mind that there is no textbook which can accommodate all needs. Therefore adaptation is strongly recommended to maximise the use of textbook.

We all know that most textbooks are designed for average students. However, in the classroom there are various types of students which can be categorised from the range of fast learners to slow learners. Therefore adaptation should suit these various types of student, particularly in foreign language classroom. Shorrocks (1995:270) expresses that "all individuals are unique in terms of their physical characteristics, personality and facility in performing certain activities". To serve different types of students, the materials can be eliminated, reordered, supplemented, and substituted (Higgs 1982). The benefits of using adapted materials can be summarised as follows:

- teacher control over content

- teacher control over cultural bias in materials

- teacher control over skills development

- teacher can readily integrate language and content

(cited from Richard-Amato 1992)

Thus, adapting materials is one thing that teachers can do to ensure that what is said and done are within reach of the child's ear and mind (Wood 1988).

To help teachers in adapting material, the following tips cited from Richard-Amato (1992) might be useful:

- consider the students' proficiency level

- build on students' prior knowledge

- highlight specific text

- control new vocabulary

- simplify grammar

- structure paragraphs carefully

From another point of view, if we would like to be honest, a textbook on one hand is convenient for the teacher to teach, especially if it is supplemented with the activities to do and all the instruction. However, on the other hand, it does not do justice to students because, as mentioned above, not every student has the same ability and competence in learning a foreign language. Of course, to treat the students individually in a 30 students class is not easy at all, although to achieve a maximum result students are best treated individually. The solution is to minimise the number of students in a class or to maximise adaptation of the material to at least cater for these varieties of learners.

In classroom practice, to help us know whether we have been doing good or bad or whether we have been able to reach the goals, we need to do an assessment and evaluation. It is not only to see how good the students are learning but also how good the teachers do the teaching.

CONCLUSSION

There are several important points that can be highlighted in improving foreign language learning program such as considering the implementation of early age learning program by taking into account the advantages from psycho-linguistic and cultural point of views, maximizing classroom interaction in order to achieve better results in learning foreign language. In the process of learning itself there are many influencing factors such as the syllabus, the materials, the methods and techniques used, the teacher as well as the students (Liando 1999). However, despite these factors, what really matters is something that happens in the classroom, namely the so-called classroom interaction. Johnson (1995:81) pointed out in her book that '... the teacher-student interactions that take place in classrooms can, ..., have an important impact on how students use a

language and what they ultimately learn "Classroom interaction can happen if teachers as well as students get involved or participate in this activity" Liando (1999:143) continues. In fact, " … while teachers have a certain amount of power in the classroom, learners also clearly influence the pace and direction of the interaction" Allwright and Bailey (1991:149). Thus, classroom interaction plays an important role in language learning.

REFERENCES

Allwright, Dick and Kathleen Bailey (1991) *Focus on the Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Bialystok, Ellen & Kenji Hakuta (1994) *In Other Words: the science and psychology of second language acquisition*, BasicBooks, New York.

Brumfit, Christopher *et al* (1995) *Teaching English to Children: from practice to principle*. Longman, Essex.

Clyne, Michael., ed. (1986) *An Early Start: Second Language at Primary School*, River Seine, Melbourne.

Ellis, Rod. (1994) *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Epstein, Noel. (1977) *Language, Ethnicity, and the Schools: Policy Alternatives for Bilingual-Bicultural Education*. Institute for Educational Leadership, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

Finocchiaro, Mary. (1964) *Teaching Children Foreign Language*, McGraw-Hill, New York.

Halliwell, Susan. (1992) *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom*. Longman, London.

Harley, Birgit. (1986) *Age in Second Language Acquisition*. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon.

Johnson, Karen. (1995) *Understanding Communication in Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Littlewood, William T. (1984) *Foreign and Second Language Learning: Language Acquisition Research and its Implications for the Classroom*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

McLaughlin, Barry. (1981) "Differences and Similarities between First- and Second-Language Learning" in *Native Language and Foreign Language Acquisition*. Ed. H. Winitz, The New York Academic of Sciences, New York. Pp.23-32.

Liando, Nihta V.F. (1999) *Foreign Language Learning in Primary Schools with Special Reference to Indonesia, Thailand and Australia*. Master of Arts (by Research) in Applied Linguistics, University of Adelaide, unpublished manuscript.

Penfield, Wilder and Lamar Roberts. (1959) *Speech and Brain Mechanisms*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

Singleton, David M. (1989) *Language Acquisition: the Age Factor*. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon.

Stern, Hans H. (1963) *Foreign Languages in Primary Education: the teaching of foreign or second languages to younger children*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Tough, Joan. (1995) "Young Children Learning Languages" in *Teaching English to Children*. Eds. Ch. Brumfit et al. Longman, Essex. Pp.213-227.