

## ENGLISH REMOVAL FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN 2013 CURRICULUM; A CARELESS OR CAREFUL STEP?

Yulian Purnama

Islamic State Institute of Purwokerto

### Abstract

*The idea of removing English for elementary school in 2013 curriculum has shocked the Indonesian education practitioners. So far, English has been considered as a favorite and prestigious subject for some modern elementary schools. English lessons is claimed to be important and is still needed by the young learners. Given the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching English in Indonesia, of course, may not equate with the teaching of English in Singapore where English is in the context of ESL (English as a Second Language). As the right method and strategy may be given to the learners, the development of language skills for children aged 6-12 years-old will not be disturbed. Then if the mother tongue, that is Bahasa Indonesia, would not be a mess if at the same time the students need to learn a foreign language. In the end, learning English will not lose identity or sense of nationalism of the students.*

**Keywords:** Young learners, English, 2013 Curriculum

### Introduction

The idea of removing English for elementary school in 2013 curriculum has shocked the Indonesian education practitioners. So far, English has been considered as a favorite and prestigious subject for some modern elementary schools. Apart from the decision from the Education Ministry that should be implemented by schools, this article is trying to find some 'notes' that can be considered so the most appropriate steps can be made for the best result for the nation. As Musliar Kasim's (The Education and Culture Minister Deputy) opinion stated in *Kompas* (December 12<sup>th</sup> 2012), English in 2006 curriculum (KTSP) is not a compulsory subject for elementary schools, it is only a local content (*muatan lokal*=MULOK). In other words, the 'prohibition' of having English in elementary schools can be regarded as an exaggeration step, for the schools that have English must have prepared anything well. It is believed that the unprepared schools must have no English.

In accordance with Minister of Education and Culture's Regulation No.23/2006, the graduation standard for English language learning is that the elementary student should be able to demonstrate skills of listening, reading, writing, and speaking English. It is shown that learning English requires elementary students to use four senses at once as well as cognitive functions.

The question is, will the development of

language skills for children aged 6-12 years-old will be disturbed? This is because at the same time they also have to use your brain and senses tools to learn another language: Bahasa Indonesia. Then if the mother tongue, that is Bahasa Indonesia, would be a mess if at the same time the students need to learn a foreign language? Will learning English will lose identity or sense of nationalism of the students?

### Discussion

Young learners are children from the first year of formal schooling to eleven or twelve years of age. They are relatively mature children with both adult and childish features. I would like to concentrate on young learners of eight and nine years of age. These learners have attended the third year of a special language programme. They can write and read in their first language but they do not have enough knowledge about grammar and grammatical categories. They are not competent to work with language as a tool although they can use it in everyday life. They are able to listen to a text and say what it is about. They still like playing games, singing songs, saying rhymes and introducing their own thoughts and ideas.

The young learner is very significant and all work should be aimed towards him. "Younger learners respond to language according to what it does or what they can do

with it, rather than treating it as an intellectual game in abstract system. This has both advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand they respond to the meaning underlying the language used and do not worry about individual words or sentences, on the other hand, they do not make the analytical links that older learners do. Younger learners have the advantage of being great mimics, are often unselfconscious, and are usually prepared to enjoy the activities the teacher has prepared for them". (Young Learners, S. Philips, 1997, p.7)

The following list shows general characteristics and language development of a young learner according to Wendy and Ytreberg (1990, p. 3)

- a. They can tell the difference between fact and fiction.
- b. Their basic concepts are formed. They have very decided views of the world.
- c. They ask questions all the time.
- d. They rely on the spoken word as well as the physical world to convey and understand meaning.
- e. They are able to make some decisions about their own learning.
- f. They have definite views about what they like and do not like doing.
- g. They have a developed sense of fairness about what happens in the classroom and begin to question the teacher's decisions.
- h. They are able to work with others and learn from others.

Young children learning languages

We can learn a lot from how little babies acquire their first language. As Brumfit, Moon and Tongue claim: "An intriguing paradox in the development of young children is their ability to establish their first language at a time when they are unable to understand anything about the system which they come to use with such competence.

From experiences of learning other languages at later ages there is much that indicates that learning a language is not easy. Yet young children the world over persist and make progress even though it later appears to be difficult. The fact that young children learn their first language such speed and competence must mean that if the process can be better understood, it should be possible to design methods through

which children learn a second language in much the same way as they learn their first language". (Teaching English to Children, 1991, p.213)

Babies learn through voice, gestures, speaker's face and tone of the voice and they perceive an atmosphere around them. Then they observe the world they live in and try to give things some titles. At first children operate with concrete words and later then they develop their abstract thinking and try to use abstract words in their speech. The more concrete the words are the more children learn. They need many real things, pictures and associations to create a second language. According to my experience they learn very quickly when they can play with real things or are able to imagine situations or actions. The best way is observing new language through real actions which are motivating for them in a right way. They do not like being taught in a directive way they enjoy active involvement. How can children be helped to learn a foreign language?

In "Teaching English to Children" (1991, p. 7) Brumfit, Moon and Tongue say: "It is not surprising to note that a child's concentration span increases as he/she grows older. Children cannot concentrate on one thing for a long period and therefore the authors recommend that lessons should be divided into a series of activities lasting no longer than five or ten minutes. This is because children are bombarded with new experiences and information. Teachers should introduce a reasonable number of new language items and present and practise them in a number of different ways. I definitely agree with this theory. Children who are tired after their school work are not able to concentrate on my after-school language course very much and I must plan my lessons carefully and then be creative during them and change prepared ones according to the pupils' mood. A teacher should recognize that an activity is not good in a very short time and must be prepared to change it.

Psychologically, primary school students in age of 7-12 year-old are at middle childhood. This phase is a golden time to learn a language other than their mother tongue (first language). The condition of his brain is still flexible and pliable so that the absorption of the language will be easier. A child's language ability in this phase is more developed with the concept of concrete operational thinking.

Areas of the brain that regulate language skills are seen having the most rapid development when children aged 6-13 years, which is commonly referred to as critical periods. In addition, the ability of the cognitive process, creativity, and divergent thinking are in optimal condition so that biologically be a great time to learn a foreign language. Other studies also showed similar results, as was done by Kormi and Nouri (2008): children who learn more than one language have more ability in episodic memory tasks, learn sentences and words, and semantic memory, fluency and categorizes message.

Two studies showed that bilingualism will not interfere with the performance of linguistic children in any language. There is no evidence that the first language to learn the language would be problematic if the second, third, and so on because the middle phase children have increased cognitive flexibility and concept formation.

According to Hurlock (1993), these children are able to understand a foreign language as well as understanding of the native language in the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, the children in primary school biologically are in golden age for learning English as a second language after the mother tongue.

Some linguists support the view that the earlier children learn a foreign language, the easier child master the language. In other word, the sooner children acquire language without much difficulty compared with adults. Similarly, Eric H. Lenneberg, neurologists, found before puberty, the intellect of brain's child is more flexible. Hence, it is easier to learn a language. While afterwards will dwindle and accomplishments were not optimal. The age of 6-12 years is a golden age or the most ideal for learning a language other than their mother tongue (first language). The reason is the child's brain is still flexible, so that the absorption process language can be smoother. Moreover, the power to absorb the language on children can automatically function. It will be enough with the self-exposure in a specific language, for example, if the learners lives in an environment other than their mother tongue language, he/she will be able to easily master the language. The golden age is not owned by an adult.

However, it does not mean that adults can not master a second language (foreign lan-

guage). Lenneberg suggests, an adult with average intelligence were, capable of learning a second language sometime after the age of 20 years. There are even capable of learning a foreign language to communicate at the age of 40 years. The fact that it is not a contrary to the hypothesis regarding age restrictions for language acquisition because the arrangement of language in the brain is formed in childhood. It's just going through puberty 'barriers of language learning' (language learning blocks). So, learning a language just after puberty, it is more hassle than it was when the age of fifteen or five years.

On first language acquisition, we know the technical term critical period. On the acquisition of a second language (foreign language) there is a terminology of sensitive period. Time sensitive mastery of foreign language syntax before the age of 15 years can master the syntax of a foreign language like a native speaker. In contrast, in adults is almost impossible to master a foreign language accents. Still on the mastery of certain aspects of a foreign language in relation to the age factor, Scovel said, the ability to master a foreign language accent ended around the age of 10 years. While mastery of vocabulary and syntax has no age limitation.

Environmental support for language learning

Although children may use similar processes for acquiring L1 and L2, the environment for L1 and L2 acquisition can be quite different (Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 2004).

Extensive research, theory, and professional debate have searched for a definitive answer to the question of the best age to begin learning a foreign language (Curtain, 1998; Harley, 1998; Harley, 1986; Singleton, 1989). One thing is certain however: given motivation and opportunity (including sufficient time and appropriate circumstances) almost anyone can attain a degree of proficiency in another language at any age.

Much publicized research on the development of the brain in infancy through early childhood suggests that there is a window for first language development (Pinker, 1994). Clearly first language develops best in early childhood. This body of research is interpreted to suggest that the innate wiring of the

brain favors early development of both first and additional languages. A judicious interpretation of brain development research would lead to the conclusion that the young brain may well be predisposed to acquiring language(s). It should not, however, lead us to the conclusion that older learners cannot learn a foreign language.

Indeed, research that compares younger and older learners of foreign languages suggests that in some respects, older learners are more efficient language learners. Short-term studies have shown that older learners acquire certain aspects of language more quickly and efficiently than do younger learners. Researchers attribute this outcome to the cognitive maturity, greater world knowledge, and enhanced learning capabilities (knowing 'how to learn') of older children and adults (Harley, 1986). However, other studies have suggested that eventually younger learners may be more proficient in the long run, even if older learners are quicker in the short run (Krashen, Scarcella and Long, 1982), particularly in the area of oral communication (Harley, 1998). There appears to be general consensus that younger learners are far more likely to attain and retain native-like pronunciation than are older learners.

The conflicting research evidence on the optimal age for language learning has centered around the ultimate level of proficiency attained. In addition to the degree of proficiency learners attain, however, there are other compelling reasons to begin language learning early.

- Since there is evidence that suggests there are cognitive benefits to early childhood bilingualism, an early start and continued progress toward bilingualism is desirable (Lee, 1996).
- Students who take a foreign language in the elementary grades may demonstrate academic gains in other areas of the curriculum (Wilburn Robinson, 1998).
- It takes a long time to gain proficiency in a foreign language, particularly when it is learned in a school setting. Therefore, the earlier students start the higher the level they are likely to achieve.
- A quality, world-class education includes foreign language study. For example, in 14 of 15 industrialized countries surveyed in 1993, foreign language learning began at age 10 or before (Bergentoft, 1994). Omit-

ting certain academic experiences simply because older learners are more efficient may be insufficient justification for curriculum design. That is, just because older learners may be faster learners does not mean that foreign language learning should be delayed.

#### Aspects of Nationalism

Minister of Education and Culture, Muhammad Nuh, in a report released by [Metrotvnews.com](http://Metrotvnews.com), Sunday, January 13, 2013, dismissed the notion that says English lessons erode students' nationalism. He explained that Indonesia's first president Sukarno, who was very good at English, but he still could struggle and fought for the independence of the nation. "Was Bung Karno's English not good enough? Was he not nationalist because (he) spoke English?" Muhammad Nuh said clearly in National Meeting of Association of Indonesian Islamic University (UII) Alumni. English lessons, explained Muhammad Nuh, will actually make the students ready for the times. He submitted that because of the assumption that states the English lessons can erode nationalism in students.

The emphasis of English to students and the use of English as the medium just as the logical consequence of article 50 paragraph (3) Education Law. The verse states: "The government and / or local governments hold at least one unit of education at all levels of education to be developed into an international educational unit."

The purpose of conducting international educational course for print output quality students who are also internationally. Not only is his level international school but mediocre quality. It is a logical thing when students were stressed to master English as an international language. Conversely, it is a joke if the student as an output of SBI / RSBI (International Standard School) cannot speak English fluently. Language competence is gained from a long process of learning through repetition and practice. Delivering of content in English in school is a valuable opportunity for students to learn the language. Opportunity to practice listening and speaking in English is hard to get outside of school because students do not have a partner to talk, unless the student is taking the course.

We may need to acknowledge that not many teachers are capable of delivering

| L1 environment                                     | L2 environment  |
|--|---|
| - language highly contextualized                   | - language more decontextualized                            |
| - in the real world the language used is authentic | - in the classroom the language used tends to be artificial |
| - learner highly motivated                         | - learners may not be highly motivated                      |

course / lesson material in English. And this is also the obstacles faced by schools. Thus, the use of English as the medium of instruction in schools is not only useful for students, but also for teachers.

There is no scientific evidence that learning a foreign language can undermine national language. As long as we can put that language in its place, then there would be no language is weakened by other languages. The world today is different than the world in 1928 when Youth Pledge was echoed keystrokes. Current world is the world that has been narrowed by a variety of developments in science and technology. The world is not fragmented by territorial area, but united by as territorial cooperation and global interests. Most of us agree that English is used in all forms of international communication.

The business world is a user of language learners output. The business world also requires competence in English for hired labor. In fact there is a tendency they also demand a second foreign language. It also does not mean that downplays the Indonesian business world, but solely because of global demands.

Some foreign ships now centralize the paperwork to India and the Philippines. Previous shipping documents handled by their agents in Indonesia. One reason is said to labor in these countries on average have good English language competence. Maybe we can not accept this excuse, but we also can not force those who reasoned this. Such is indeed the fact, it's time we face demands that the global nature. As long as we can put in place a language foreign language it will not weaken our national language, let alone to eliminate identity and weaken nationalism.

Unlike the Minister of Education and Culture, a different thing was delivered by Musliar Kasim, Deputy of Minister of Education and Culture. The discourse of removal English subjects in primary school curriculum is delivered based on two reasons: fear of burdening students and concerns that elementary school

students are not focused on learning the national language, which is Bahasa Indonesia. This discourse has given rise to the pros and cons in the community. In the legislature, members of House Commission X, Rohmani argued "It is an appropriate policy to focus on familiarization Indonesian since elementary school (SD)" (Republika Online, 10/17/2012). Furthermore, he stated "the change" (removal of English lessons) be a positive thing to instill a sense of nationalism. On the other hand, Widyaswara Education Quality Assurance Agency Kepulauan Bangka Belitung Province, Ali Ansori wrote concern that the emergence of the new policy, a waiver of the many benefits derived from the teaching of English in the elementary school curriculum. He further mentioned that mastering English would be too late if English is introduced at the junior high "(SekolahDasar.Net, 21/10/2012).

Teaching English in Indonesia for elementary students is based on the The Decree from Minister of Education and Culture No.. 060/U/1993 dated February 25, 1993 about the possibility of the English program as a local content subject SD, and can be started in 4th grade. This policy was taken because of the need to participate in the globalization era. During its development, the first English language is the subject of local content choices become mandatory local content subjects in some areas. Furthermore, English lessons, which was originally started in 4th grade to begin in grade 1, 2, and 3. Given the context of EFL teaching English in Indonesia, of course, may not equate with the teaching of English in Singapore where English is in the context of ESL (English as a second language). In countries where English is taught in the context of ESL available more authentic materials such as newspapers, billboards, TV news, the signs in traffic, radio and TV programs in English making it easier for students to acquire a second language . It was certainly different from countries like Indonesia in EFL contexts where authentic material more widely available in the national language, Bahasa Indonesia. Therefore, the attempt to equate the scope of the English curriculum in ESL and EFL course will give students the cognitive load. Thus, it is not wise to compare the achievement of students' English language skills in countries with EFL ESL. It is possible that the assumptions underlying the English child cognitive overload.

In the EFL context, where the government has a strong commitment to uphold and develop the Indonesian language as a first language students, the achievement of the target subjects of English at primary school level can be simplified to just basic communicative skills so as not to burden the students cognitively. Lightbown and Spada (2011) in their book entitled "How Languages are Learned" states that, children who were older (aged ten years) capable of digesting foreign language lessons more quickly than children who start at age early (such as age six or seven years) in foreign language subjects that just a few hours a week. However, they add, it takes time for intensive foreign language exposure. "The timing of one or two hours a week for pupils aged seven and eight years will not produce fluent speakers of foreign languages". Furthermore, Cummins, as cited by Baker (2011) in his book "Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism", stating that in the United States (in this case, English is within the scope of the majority is used as a first language), children with background behind family who use English as a second language takes one or two years to acquire English language used in basic communicative skills in everyday speech. In fact, Hakuta, as quoted by Baker (2011), in his research on English language teaching program for immigrants in California, found that it takes three to five years to develop oral proficiency (listening and speaking skills in English). These findings strengthen the argument that students who are in the EFL context would require a longer time to acquire basic communicative skills (bics) is at least as much exposure to authentic materials in English. The implication of these findings is government policy to start learning English at the level of Junior High School (SMP) is feared will lead to lack of allocation of time required for the process of English language acquisition, even for basic communicative skills in everyday conversation. Furthermore, to think about the impact of the lack of English in the elementary school curriculum to teaching English in junior high school level. Without the experience of speaking English in the previous level, cognitive load junior high students in learning English becomes more severe.

In other words, the elimination of English in the elementary curriculum is a wrong step. How could the students develop the skills of English language skills "to participate in the age of communication and globalization, as well as

to transfer knowledge, both in oral bahasaInggris (lectures, discussions, presentations) or written (read reference, write reports, and so on)" where expertise basic communicative course not overwhelmed? Concerns about English lessons only adds to the cognitive load elementary school students should be addressed by improving the teaching methodology, curriculum and assessment system that accompanied the study of psychology of language development in children, not eliminate from the English language curriculum.

The second concerns the discourse that led to the elimination of English in primary school curriculum is because English is assessed to make students learn Indonesian focus and impact on the sense of nationalism. If the Indonesian curriculum prepared with interesting content that also develop basic communicative skills of students (in this case not only the theory of grammar), certainly there should be no concern that students are not the focus of the first language. Furthermore, where teachers can socialize a clear framework that the role is not as important Indonesian with English, so students can appreciate both languages with balanced and use both equally well. Education providers should make the curriculum that make up the character of the students to be able to be fair and balanced in the face of the challenges of the times. In an era when communication technology has developed very rapidly, do not equip yourself with sufficient foreign language skills to progress like isolating themselves. It is sad when the world began to think to break the paradigm of monolingual mindset, we retreated back to the mindset of the reasons nationalism.

In conclusion, the government's decision to remove the teaching of English in primary school curriculum is not the right decision because it requires intensive exposure and long enough so that the students are learning English in the EFL context mastering basic communicative skills in English. Learning English can be started at the beginning of the age of the children provided that in the design methodology and appropriate evaluation system, not to give English lessons to the heavy burden of student cognitively. In addition, the global communication flow so rapidly that affect monolingual mindset changes made statements that some

people learn a foreign language at an early age have an impact on the sense of nationalism needs to be questioned and rethought.

#### REFERENCES

- Baker, Colin (2011) *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, Great Britain.
- Bergentoft, R. (1994). "Foreign Language Instruction: A Comparative Perspective." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 532: 8-34.
- Brewster, Jean; Ellis, Gail; Girard, Denis (2004).: *The Primary English Teacher' Guide*. Penguin: Hong Kong.
- Curtain, H.; Pesola, A. (1998) *Languages and Children: Making the Match..* Second edition. New York: Longman.
- Harley, Birgit. (1986). *Age in Second Language Acquisition*. San Diego, CA: College Hill Press.
- Harley, Birgit. (1998). "The Outcomes of Early and Later Language Learning," in Myriam Met, ed., *Critical Issues in Early Second Language Learning*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.
- Hurlock, Elizabeth B. (1993) *Perkembangan Anak Jilid 1*, ed.6.Jakarta, Penerbit Erlangga.
- Kormi-Nouri, Reza. (2008). *Cognition and Neuroscience, The Effect of Childhood Bilingualism on Episodic and Semantic Memory Tasks*. Scandinavian Journal of Psychology. Oxford : Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Krashen, Scarcella and Long, (1982), *Child-Adult Differences in Second Language Acquisition*, Rowley, Massachusetts; Newbury House
- Lennenberg, Eric H., (1967) *Biological Foundations of Language*, New York
- Lightbown and Spada (2011), *How Languages Are Learned*, Oxford
- Pinker, Steven, (1994) *The Language Instinct*, William Morrow and Company, Robinson, Wilburn, D. (1998). The cognitive, academic, and attitudinal benefits of early language learning. In M. Met (Ed.), *Critical issues in early second language learning: Building for our children's future* (pp. 37-43). Reading, MA: Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley.
- S., Phillips. (1997) *Young Learners*. OUP, , ISBN 0194371956
- Scott W. A. and Ytreberg L. H (1991) - *Teaching English to Children*. Longman
- Singleton, David. (1989) . *Language Acquisition: The Age Factor* . Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

#### Websites Sources:

- Metrotvnews.com, Sunday, January 13, 2013
- Kompas Online December 12<sup>th</sup> 2012
- Republika Online, 10/17/2012
- SekolahDasar.Net, 21/10/2012