

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MAKASSAR: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Teachers are one of the most important parts in the discourse of education and the process of teaching and learning in schools. It was this that interested the writer to research their perceptions of English language teaching for primary students. The respondents are five participants from different primary schools in Makassar. They were asked to comment on their beliefs in terms of the materials used in the classrooms, the aims of teaching English for primary students, their problems in relation to professional knowledge, classroom practices and context (school and community), and their way to resolve many problems. The responses are grouped into four major categories in terms of the aims of the research and examined to explore similarities and differences. The result showed that when the materials are about familiar topics and are presented through songs, games, and pictures, in the classroom they result in positive student attitude and increase interest and motivation in learning English. Participants feel that the main aim of teaching English for young students is to provide them with as much vocabulary as possible before they move on to higher education. Finally, some constraints of the program are also found in the classroom practices.

Key words: *Education system, instructional materials, and Primary School.*

1. Introduction

English language has gained more importance in the era of globalisation and is now used in many aspects of life. "It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, and advertising" (Pennycook: 1995 in Crystal, 1987: 358). This is one of the many reasons why the Indonesian government has put English language as a part of the Educa-

tion system. Although English has been in Indonesian schools for five decades, the result is far from satisfactory. Dardjowidjojo (2002: 117) says, 'Almost without exception, everyone agreed that we had not been successful in our endeavour to make our children able to communicate in this language'. The introduction of English in primary schools was launched in 1994 as one effort to resolve this problem. Many research studies also show that young students are able to acquire a foreign language in schools.

Under the 1994 curriculum, the government promotes the teaching of English. However, the inclusion of English for primary students depends on school and community, and is a local component of the school curriculum. Sutarsyah (2004) points out local components as the manifestation of local policy, which is based on local needs and situation. English language is one of the most popular subjects chosen by school and community at this local level. The government's policy allows school and community to carry out the program if all the facilities are available in the school since the government does not provide teachers and curriculum at the primary level. School and community are then responsible for preparing teachers, curriculum, and providing facilities whenever they want to introduce English language teaching.

The teachers play an important role to determine the process of teaching and learning English in schools. This has inspired me to write a thesis about English language teaching in primary schools in Indonesia from the teachers' perspectives. Exploring teachers' perceptions may lead to a better understanding of the programs and the problems encountered by teachers.

This research is aimed at (1) identifying teachers' beliefs in terms of the materials used in the classrooms, (2) identifying the aims of teaching English for primary students from their perceptions, (3) identifying teachers' problems relating with teaching English for primary students and finally, (4) Exploring how they attempt to resolve these problems.

The introduction of a foreign language at primary level has been a matter of debate for many years. In the industrialized countries like the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia, a foreign language at primary level is not a new thing. There are also some primary schools, which apply a foreign language as a medium of transferring knowledge that is content-based language instruction. This study

of a second language at primary level is regarded as highly desirable. A study by an American researcher (Andersson, 1969) notes:

There are countries in which conditions would be greatly improved if from an early age all children acquired a useful control of a second language: English or French in Canada, Sinhalese or Tamil in Ceylon, French or Flemish in Belgium, for example. And in our own country the early mastery of a second language by English-speaking children (French in New England and Louisiana; German in Pennsylvania, Texas, and various parts of the Midwest; Chinese and Japanese on the Pacific coast; and Spanish in New York, Florida, and the Southwest, for example) could be expected to improve the social relations between linguistic groups politically and economically.

One of the considerations of introducing a foreign language in the elementary level according to Bumpass (1963:4) is the enthusiastic and interested of the expression of young children as they respond with ease, correctness, and pleasure, becomes a satisfying argument instead of giving it to secondary level. Furthermore, Bumpass offers two major advantages of introducing foreign language to children. Firstly, young children own an auditory perception and memory so they can learn to repeat sounds quickly and accurate and can retain the new learning without problems. Secondly, children have fewer inhibitions and respond with greater ease and less-consciousness, ever present problems, which often experienced by adult students.

In terms of the children who live in multicultural society, the children will be able to overcome their monolingual limitations in learning foreign language and adjust the new role and adapt in fast changing environment in the contemporary scene (Ratte, 1967:271).

In the case of Australia, in 1976, under Federal government's committee recommendations on the teaching of Migrant Languages in schools, it was recommended that a language other than English should be introduced for all students in primary schools (Clyne, et.al, 1995). The policy is based on a combination of Australia's multilingual and multicultural society and on economic demand.

McGrath (1967) believes the process of language learning for children should be at an age when they are naturally curious about language, when they have fewest inhibitions, and when they imitate most easily new sounds and sound patterns. The theory of Vygotsky, a Russian linguist, on children's language development regards the role of language as providing children with a new tool and the role of adults as bringing the world for children by doing things and organizing information through the use of words as symbols.

Introducing a foreign language at an early age, particularly at primary level is considered to be the best time for children to acquire a foreign language. The view of Dunn suggests:

Young children are acquirers. Acquisition takes place subconsciously in situations where speakers communicate naturally. In these situations, speakers are more concerned with the use of language to convey meaning than with the correct usage. They want to say something, and without thinking to communicate with the language they know ('use) rather than analyse it in order to find out the correct 'usage' or way to use it (1983: 3).

Children who have already successfully acquired skills in their mother tongue do not seem to have difficulties in learning a foreign language. According to Emmit and Pollock (1997), maintaining separate contexts for the two languages helps to avoid any possible confusion in the learning process. Brown (1980)

argues that research on non – simultaneous second language learning in childhood indicates that linguistic and cognitive processes similar to those used in first language learning are used. The foreign language learning process does not interfere with the language that the children already have. They have an ability to differentiate and adapt from one language to another language as they are learning (in Emmit and Pollock, 1997: 189).

One other advantage for children in learning a foreign language is that they will be excited to learn something new and will enjoy it. Dunn (1983) argues that children are willing to use language and experiment with sounds, without worrying about making mistakes, which is often a barrier for adult learners. Learning a foreign language may become fun and pleasant for them as long as the materials and activities are suitable for their elementary level. Correction is regarded as a natural means of learning, which does not diminish their self – esteem. So, they interact spontaneously without any sense of shame.

The objectives of English language learning for young learners based on the work of Hawkes as cited by Dunn (1983: 33) is that "age, cultural context and general educational priorities influence content more than purely linguistic considerations". Ratte (1967) expresses a similar view, "the main objectives of a long sequence foreign language program are twofold: linguistic and cultural". However, Hawk points out that the cultural part is sometimes the secondary goal with a primary focus on the development of language skill.

The introduction of English language in primary schools in Indonesia is based on the policy of the Department of Education in 1992, which was the basis for the 1994 curriculum. According to Sutarsyah (2004), the goal of English language teaching in primary school in Indonesia is to enable young students to master simple communication suitable for the child's world, limited to listening and speaking. Read-

ing and writing are not emphasized: the program focuses on simple expression and sentences. It is hoped that having these skills, the learners will have positive attitudes towards the use of English which at the same time can build motivation to learn English in their future study.

The application of the program depends on the school and parents' decision. An appropriate lesson plan and methodology aims to motivate students to follow the program. Language use should be simple and familiar and cover daily activity.

The implementation of the English program at primary level must be taken seriously regarding the characteristics of young learners. It must encourage them to participate actively during the class. Therefore, instructional materials play an important role in this program. Teachers should select materials carefully based on the objectives and students' interest.

Various kinds of materials, for example, songs, stories, games and reading materials are considered useful for elementary students. It is important for them not only to teach them words but also allow them to play with the language. Abe (1991), observed that young children studying English should be treated differently from teenagers and adults. Special treatment is needed to attract students' attention. Teachers should know a variety of techniques such as techniques of asking questions, conducting group activities, playing games, singing songs and using media.

As Brooks (1967) has indicated, three approaches must be considered: descriptive linguistics (language), psychology (learning), and cultural anthropology (meaning). Ratte (1967) suggests appropriate language teaching techniques can be dialogues, narratives, action series, and short dramatizations. The dialogue provides not only an exchange of conversation between two or more students but also creates imaginary situations within the experience and interests of students. The dia-

logue should talk about simple and familiar situations such as home, family, school, class, numbers, days, months, and colours. Narrative and action series allow the students to talk and describe someone or something. An oral presentation describing interesting people or places is a form of narration, while action series might be describing someone's daily activity. Role-play is also a very useful way to improve children's language as well as short, interesting stories, well prepared and suitable for the language level of children.

However, the teacher needs to know how well children can absorb the materials. According to Dunn (1983), teachers must know what concepts students already know and what concepts they are likely to learn during the school year. Some materials are sometimes so difficult that teacher can change to different activities, which are more suitable for the language development and experience of children. Songs, games, and story reading are considered useful activities to avoid boredom. Most children like singing. They memorize songs easily even without understanding the words. Ratte (1967) defines games as an effective means of motivation, which provide a change of pace in classroom activity. Games can be profitable and pleasant language learning experiences when they are well prepared, presented, and controlled. Most children are keen to participate in such activities.

Richards (1988) has indicated that good instructional media should have three roles: attention role, communicational role, and retention role. The objectives of using media are to attract the learners' attention and heighten their curiosity. In this case, pictures and realia are very helpful for the teacher to do the activity.

The use of audio-visual media is considered to bring a great number of advantages in the learning process. Colourful charts, flash cards, pictures, photo, and filmstrips help the students to build an imaginative understanding

of the new language. Improving pronunciation can be effective if the teacher presents a standard model of English so that children find easier to imitate the language. The work of Ratte (1967: 285 - 286) clearly states the advantages of using television as a means of instruction:

Television programs can bring to a large numbers of students a master teaching having native or near-native pronunciation, a professionally prepared presentation of the language, and cultural material filed in the country or countries where the target language is spoken.

The use of television will bring a direct impact because children are able to see things clearly. However, a follow up presentation about the materials is still needed.

Ward (1979 in Dunn, 1983) observes that the class size must be limited because young children need individual attention. Children need to be paid attention and encouraged regularly and continuously. Teachers play an important role in the success of the program since children are dependent so much especially for the first couple of week. According to Dunn (1983), young children are eager to build a relationship with their teacher. To build up a good relationship, he suggests that children have to feel the teacher respects them and understand their needs.

A group, which consists of more than ten children, seems to be impossible for the lesson to be managed. Similarly, the size of the class cannot be too small since each child can also learn by hearing others repeat a word or phrase, so the ideal situation implies a group of reasonable size which can support the learning process (Ward, 1979). However, if there is more than one group of up to ten children, the teacher should have lists made of children belonging to each group and stick to these lists as regularly as possible (Ward, 1979). Simi-

larly, when the size class is too small, it is not a good situation because language interaction is needed among students.

The choice of time and duration of length of the lesson will influence the language learning process. Children will not be comfortable and enjoy the learning when they are hungry and tired. Early in the morning or in the afternoon is highly recommended since they are still fresh and interested. Ward (1979 in Dunn, 1983) observes that four periods of 15 minutes or three periods of 20 minutes per week seem to produce the best result and are more effective than a single one-hour meeting once a week. However, according to Dunn (1983), lessons which are too short do not give children enough time to get 'warmed up' or for sufficient experiences to take place for adequate acquisition and consolidation. In contrast, long lessons will make children bored and lose concentration. Once they lose concentration and motivation, the teacher should change an activity and encourage children's curiosity.

The environment of the learning process must be taken into account. The environment should allow the students to be active to listen to and join the activity. The children will feel secure and enjoy the activity if they are placed in a situation, which is familiar to them. The learning process will have a better result when a clean, quiet, peaceful classroom supports it. In contrast, the children will not enjoy and lose the motivation if the classroom is small, dark, and unpleasant or gets disturbance by other groups. As Dunn (1983: 30) has indicated:

Atmosphere is important for children and if teachers expect them to use only English in the lesson, children as much help as possible to make the transition from language 1. It is possible to create an English atmosphere in a classroom with pictures, notices and books in English or by playing English songs in the cassette.

The teacher can arrange the chairs to accommodate a real life activity for children. A round table, for example, will be so useful so that they can see, work, and listen to each other. A carpet could be another choice for the teacher to change the mood. Both teacher and students then can sit on the floor together to do the activities.

In terms of teacher qualification, an understanding and liking of children are necessary. Teacher must have a psychological notion of the world of children. The work of Cameron (1994) as cited by Luciana (2004) reports that, while learning a foreign language, young learner is in the process of organizing their world: forming and refining their concepts and ideas as they endeavour to internalise the surrounding input. The relationship between teacher and student must be harmonized. Teachers and students should be involved together so that students feel secure and settled to follow the program. Teachers should have specialist qualifications in English and know the primary school environment. Teachers could also be an elementary school teacher who has been trained in the teaching of English to young children (Brooks, 1967).

A teacher should plan the practice and drills needed to enable the students to hear the sounds of the language accurately; otherwise they will not be able to produce them (Ratte, 1967). Children memorize language more easily and with more enjoyment than adults. Before starting speaking a foreign language, for the first step they listen and watch the language spoken by the teachers for a certain time so that the students understand, learn and are able to speak the language spontaneously. To quote Dunn (1983: 5):

A programme which follows the same framework, with familiar and new activities slotted into it, gives children an opportunity to predict the meaning of the language used, since much of it, for ex-

ample the organisation language, will be the same. With regular repetitions of the same prefabricated language, children quickly understand situations and memorize the language involved. It appears that children learning another language have a great capacity to imitate and memorize long utterances as they have already had to do this when learning language 1.

The children are natural language learners because they imitate the teacher or friend spontaneously. The teachers must use English as much as possible as the medium of instruction during the program. However, if there are misunderstandings and quarrels among the children, the teachers need a mother tongue language to solve them.

Parental attitude towards learning English at primary level can influence the learning result. Although parents recognize the importance of mastering English both written and spoken, I still found some parents doubt that English should be taught in primary schools. In this case the school and teacher play an important role in explaining to the parents the advantages of English language teaching in the primary school. In relation to attitude towards language, students who feel positive about the language will have a greater success than the students with a negative attitude (Emmitt and Pollock, 1997). The parents' attitude to determining the success of the study by achieving good marks needs to be changed. Learning a foreign language takes a long time. The parents and home bring the strongest influence on a child's life. According to Dunn (1983), if parents are interested in their children's achievement in English and show appreciation of their success, the children will be motivated. For the children, they want to make their parents proud by showing what they have achieved during their language learning. The parent's appreciation will be very important for them. Dunn (1983) concludes children without parental

support are undoubtedly at a disadvantage. Furthermore Ward (1979: 30) notes:

The teacher must produce the best possible surroundings, both physically and mentally, to encourage the child to learn and to enjoy doing so. This means that sometimes has to try to influence parents and kindergarten personnel in a positive way and gain their support she plans to do with the children. She must also try to keep in touch with parents, invite them to visit the foreign-language lessons so that they can be made aware of what is going on in the meetings.

Based on the arguments above, I may conclude that parents' support would influence the learning process of children.

2. Research Methods

The work of Dabbs (1982) as quoted by Berg (1998) distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative research methods. Dabbs notes that quantitative method refers to the amount of something while qualitative method is concerned with the nature of something. According to Dabbs (1982), qualitative research refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things. In contrast, quantitative research refers to count and measure things.

Qualitative research is an approach that seeks to understand aspects of social life and also the people who belong to the environment. According to Berg (1998), qualitative research is interested in how people arrange themselves and their settings and how they connect the settings and their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so on. Through qualitative research, researchers may explore people's perceptions about things and understand themselves and others.

Bryman (2001: 264) has defined qualitative research as "a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification". A similar view can be seen from Maykut and Morehouse (1994), who suggest that qualitative research generally examines people's words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely representing the situation