

## ANOTHER EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF THE EARLY INTRODUCTION OF EFL IN INDONESIA

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### ABSTRACT

The English vocabulary mastery of Junior High School students had been influenced by their previous experience of learning English in Elementary School. The study was aimed to examine the influence of the English learning implementation in Elementary School towards the level of students' English learning achievement in the next stage, Junior High School. For convenience, four Junior High Schools were chosen as sample schools, i.e.: SMP Negeri 1, SMP Negeri 8, SMP Al-Irsyad and SMP Susteran in the town of Purwokerto. This type of ex-post facto survey includes 142 students from the first year consisting of 73 students from Elementary Schools which had implemented the English teaching while 69, from schools which had not. To know their achieving of English, the students were given a test on vocabulary which was learned for the first four months. The result shows that using the t-test statistical tool,  $t_{\text{value}}$  is much greater than  $t_{\text{critical value}}$  or 3.0692 > 1.960 with 140 df, at the 5% level of significance. It means that the alternative hypothesis: "a significant difference in the mastery of Junior High School between students who had received English as a compulsory course at their elementary schooling background and those who had not exists" is confirmed. Therefore, it is statistically proven that the teaching of English at Elementary Schools contributes to the students' English achievement.

**Key words:** ex-post facto, achievement, early age, the t-test, and English implementation.

### 1. Introduction

Early foreign language teaching has nowadays become a trend in Indonesia. In many elementary schools English is taught as a compulsory subject ranging from grades 1 to 4. Everywhere, foreign language courses, kindergartens, and play groups offer special programs for young children and pre-school attendants. This is apparently a step in the right direction, since as a foreign language, English is learned almost exclusively in classrooms, where the very

influential factor, exposure is inadequately presented. Success in foreign language learning badly needs extensive linguistic exposure as inputs. Seen from the language pedagogical perspective, the teaching of English for elementary school level students indicates the developing growing awareness of the need for giving an early start in the process of learning a second/ foreign language.

There are some explanations as to why learning a language is better started at a very



early age. First, the speed for acquiring new things in this stage of life is amazing. Second, acquisition (unconsciously) of languages is possible. Then, the elasticity of the young brain makes it possible to accommodate for a great number of inputs. And last but not least, children by nature enjoy working with words of which a language consists.

The eminent Canadian neurosurgeon, Penfield & Roberts (1959: 235-6) for many years has argued that the human brain loses 'plasticity' after puberty and language learning after that age becomes increasingly difficult. He states that "The child's brain is plastic compared with that of an adult. Before the age of nine to twelve, a child is a specialist in learning to speak. At that age he can learn two or three languages as easily as one...". This potential should be exploited. Therefore, promoting children's vocabulary mastery is a good idea in order to optimize their speaking capacity in the target language. To speak one needs vocabulary knowledge.

Another expert that has got involved much in the field of neurophysiology and its relevance with the process of language development, Lenneberg has viewed the early second or foreign languages as beneficial. This expert's idea written in *A Critical Period Hypothesis* (1967: 248) points out that before puberty comes the human brain works best for language acquisition. This is due to the incompleteness of cerebral lateralization of language function, which becomes irreversible after cerebral growth phenomena have come to a conclusion.

The ideas of the two outstanding experts above are not supported with evidence from foreign or second language studies. Nevertheless, their arguments are still rational, convincing, and likely correct in the light of existing knowledge.

Stern, however, presents a summary table of the pros and cons of the early teaching of a second language. The table below is slightly

modified form:

- 1) Age of acquisition: before adolescence (ages 3 – 10)
  - (a) Advantages:
    - (i) Accords with the neurophysiology of the brain
    - (ii) Easiest and most effective
    - (iii) Natural good pronunciation
    - (iv) Leaves richer linguistic memory traces for later expansion
    - (v) Longer time for language can be allowed
  - (b) Disadvantages:
    - (i) Possible confusion with first language habits
    - (ii) No conscious acquisition of language learning process
    - (iii) Time spent not commensurate with results
- 2) Age of acquisition: at adolescence (ages 11– school leaving)
  - (a) Advantages:
    - (i) Increased capacity to appreciate many aspects of language and culture contacts
    - (ii) Still sufficient time to attain high standard
    - (iii) Improved memory and higher level of intellectual growth
    - (iv) First language skills well established, hence no confusion
  - (b) Disadvantages:
    - (i) More laborious than early learning
    - (ii) Success demands tenacity
    - (iii) Self-consciousness
    - (iv) Possible refusal to memorize
    - (v) Experience has shown poor results frequent
    - (vi) Already crowded curricula and specialization of studies
- 3) Age of acquisition: adulthood
  - (a) Advantages:
    - (i) Specificity of purpose
    - (ii) Good motivation added to reasons mentioned for adolescence
    - (iii) Greatest amount of learning in least amount of time
  - (b) Disadvantages:
    - (i) Not enough time
    - (ii) Other preoccupation
    - (iii) Irregularity of study



Several of the listings above are either in error (e.g. 1.a.i) or contradictory (e.g. 1.a.ii with 3.a.iii); others are at best highly controversial. No mention is made of the potential balance effect. Despite the shortcomings, however, the table is useful because it poses the problem of early foreign language teaching in terms of relative advantages and disadvantages rather than in terms of the pseudoquestion of which is the best time.

Generally speaking, children aged between 3 through 5 know the language use and know partly how to use their first language. They have mastered some vocabulary, been able to use basic grammatical structures, and started to know when, where, and to whom certain linguistic forms are best used. Though all these linguistic skills continue to increase in sophistication during the school years, the foundations have already been developed by the time a child is of preschool age (Tabors & Snow in Genesee, 1994: 7). During preschool years some children have not only developed these linguistic skills in a first language, but also have developed them in two languages simultaneously.

According to Foss and Hakes (1978: 264-65) the language development of children includes changes in number, type, and complexity of semantic concepts; knowledge of syntactic structures, and capacity in producing complete expressions. These potential facilities develop very fast, and by the time children reach the age of 4 or 5 they will have been able to produce expressions similar to those used by adults.

The fact that where children like imitating and repeating words adults say is another thing that we should take into account as far as early second language learning is concerned. Even, too frequently they do this with comfort and enthusiastically. A recent pilot project research on teaching of English to students of two elementary schools in the *Minang* setting has shown some interesting findings. According to

this research study, ninety per cent of the students have eventually been able to do simple conversations in English, especially that dealt with requesting, introducing, telling time, working with numbers <http://uptbahasaitb.tripod.com/conf2004/parrall/rusdi.htm>.

They have shown considerable motivation and positive attitude towards the language and the program implementation. Another finding highly relevant is the students' English vocabulary mastery which reaches an average of 300 within a period of two semesters. Obviously, it is a great achievement and appealing to those who have interest in second language teaching.

As has been discussed earlier, children enjoy working with words. It is in line with Coady's & Hucken idea (1997: 227) that "... it appears quite logical for beginning L2 learners to put most of their emphasis on learning words". Consequently, it is strategic, in this period of life, to teach them vocabulary. Vocabulary is arguably central to language acquisition and use, because no language is without vocabulary. Unfortunately, little emphasis has been placed on the acquisition of vocabulary in research and in the classroom. Most contemporary academic approaches to language learning place minimal importance on vocabulary learning and appear to assume that somehow words will be learned as by-product of the other language activities.

In the meanwhile, the English programs implemented needs a careful evaluation. The attempts to bring positive changes might come true or, in the contrary, fail. In connection with this, the research on the English learning experience at elementary school level and its effect on the learners' vocabulary mastery at junior high school level was conducted. The research question is: "Does a significant difference in the mastery of the English vocabulary exist between the junior high school students who had received English lessons at their then elementary schools and those who had not?"



The answer to this question is expected to give a valuable input to the government and education practitioners that had taken part in introducing English to young children regarding the efficacy of their policy or program. The extent to which the implementation of English for elementary school students has certain special merit to the success of learning the language in the later stage can be seen from whether or not there is a significant difference in English vocabulary mastery between the two groups under investigation. The hypothesis to the research question is that a significant difference in the mastery of the English vocabulary exists between the junior high school students who had received English lessons at their then elementary schools and those who had not.

## 2. Research Method

In regard with the aim of this research and nature of the research problem a survey study was conducted. According to van Dalen in Stephen Isaac (1971), one of the aims of survey studies is "to make comparison and evaluations". Two groups of students with different English learning backgrounds were compared in order to evaluate the effect on the English vocabulary mastery at the later learning stage (Junior High School). An *ex-post facto* design was used for the comparison. By this design, this means that the data collected was not a result of certain intervention by the researcher, as commonly found in experimental studies.

This research did not involve the whole population. For convenience, four Junior High Schools were chosen as sample schools, i.e.: SMP Negeri 1, SMP Negeri 8, SMP Al-Irsyad and SMP Susteran in the town of Purwokerto. According to an initial survey into a document on Elementary School history the number of the students who had received English lessons at their elementary education and those who had not was found most nearly balanced at the four Junior High Schools above. The sample

of this research was 142 students. To achieve a representativeness, the following procedures were taken: (1) the data that included student name and elementary school history were borrowed from the four school authorities (a survey that identified the Elementary Schools which had been implementing the introduction of English to their students had already been done before); (2) group membership, identifying a student as to belong to "Elementary Schools with English" or "Elementary Schools without English"; (3) twenty up to twenty-five per cent of the names were randomly selected from each group members as sample.

The research data on Junior High School vocabulary mastery was elicited through a test. The test instrument was carefully developed, especially in terms of content and construct validities. The test materials are based on syllabus of English study of the first four months of Junior High Schools. It consists of 30 objective test items (10 of multiple-choice, 10 of matching, and the other 10 of one-word gap filling type).

The data (scores) obtained were, then, processed using the t-test statistical tool in order to compare means of the two independent samples (Woods, *et al.*, 1986: 177).

## 3. Findings and Discussion

The research data statistical test has resulted in the following summarized statistic.

	Group A	Group B	Difference	t-value
N	73	69		
Mean	4.0246	3.0898	0.9348	3.0692

df = 140,  $\alpha = 5\%$  (two tailed-test)

t-critical value = 1.960

It is clearly seen from the test statistic that  $t_{\text{value}}$  is much greater than  $t_{\text{critical value}}$  or  $3.0692 > 1.960$  with 140 df, at the 5% level of significance. It necessarily means that the alternative hypothesis: "a significant difference



in the mastery of Junior High School mastery between students who had received English as a compulsory course at their elementary schooling background and those who had not exists" is confirmed. Therefore, it is statistically proven through this research study that the teaching of English at elementary schools contributes to the students' English achievement. The students who attended English lessons at their elementary school level benefit from it, in this case their vocabulary mastery is better than those who did not.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research study has convincingly shown that the teaching or introduction of English to young learners (Elementary School attendants) have positive effect on the learners'

achievement at the later learning stage (Junior High School).

This evidence that Junior High School students vocabulary improves as a consequence of the teaching of English at elementary school level is significant. A pedagogical implication emerged from this finding is that the introduction of English as a foreign language to children attending elementary schools or those of earlier grade is worth boosting. The government policy launch and public initiatives in the program of introducing and socializing English to young children should be supported by all elements of the society within this country. I am very optimistic that the dramatic introduction of English to young learners today is promisingly fruitful and help us keep a pace with other countries in the foreseeable future.

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