

Teaching English in Primary Schools: Benefits and Challenges

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Abstract—Teaching English in primary schools relates to the readiness of the schools and the students' proficiency levels. If the schools have the sufficiency of English teachers, media, and textbooks, they will be ready to teach English. It is because primary schools deal with young learners aged 6-12 years and this period is believed as the best moment to gain knowledge. It is in line with the basic principle stating that young learners can learn English better [11]. Teaching English in primary schools provides both benefits and challenges. The benefits are reported by Moon [16], Singleton [10], and Read [18], and the problems are pointed by Copland, et al. [9], Khamari et al. [8], and Wei-pei [7]. Regarding the issue, this article identifies the benefits and challenges based on theories and research findings and then proposes several solutions of the difficulties which can be the references for the schools to provide high-quality English teaching and learning.

Keywords—teaching English in primary schools, benefits, challenges, solutions

I. INTRODUCTION

English in Indonesia becomes one of the foreign languages that are taught in the schools besides local and national languages [1]. However, it is only considered a local content subject [2], which means that the schools have their right to teach English or not by taking into account their local needs and regional condition. In the past, English was not learnt in the primary school level, but then English is considered essential for several purposes, such as science, technology, culture, and the like. Therefore, the Indonesian government decides to include English in the primary school's curriculum, known as curriculum 1994, curriculum 2004, and curriculum 2006 or it is called as School-Based Curriculum [3].

In Indonesia, only several primary schools teach English to their students. For example, in Yogyakarta, there are only 67 out of 166 primary schools that teach English to the students (*Dinas Pendidikan, Pemuda, dan Olahraga Provinsi DIY, 2017*). It shows that the number of primary schools teaching English has not reached half the number of primary schools, so the level of English language teaching readiness in the primary schools has not been encouraging enough.

Teaching English in primary schools means teaching students aged 6-12 years, regarded as young learners [4]. As they are still young, they will come to the class with different levels of English knowledge. They may come with excellent English; the others may know nothing about English at all. This condition causes a difference among students' motivation in learning English. Some of them feel that English is easy and enjoyable, and others think that English is difficult and tedious [5]. Furthermore, the students who are very interested in English need to be facilitated to experience an appropriate English lesson, while they who are not interested in learning English need to be motivated and supported more by showing that English is exciting and fun. Consequently, if the schools have appropriate facilities, such as English books, media, and competent teachers, they can facilitate and support the students well to learn English.

It can be concluded that teaching English in primary schools must have many challenges. English can be profitable and destructive for young learners [6]. It might be beneficial if the activities are exciting and related to young learners' life. It will also make them willing to learn English. In contrast, it can be destructive if the activities are not fun and related to young learners' life. Hence, it will make them dislike learning English.

Along with that statement, several studies in the area of teaching English in primary schools have been conducted. They are in the case of textbooks, English teachers, parents' awareness, students' social status, students' interest, and so on [7,8]. From these phenomena, the statement saying that there are many problems and challenges in teaching English in primary schools is true [7,8,9]. Therefore, providing the solutions can help the schools to solve those problems that may happen in the real implementation of English teaching-learning processes at schools. The answers can be obtained by giving training for English teachers, educating parents that English is fundamental, motivating the students with attractive teaching materials, and the like.

As many challenges happen in teaching English in primary schools, these issues need more attention to be

analyzed. Therefore, several research questions are proposed; What are the benefits of teaching English in primary schools?, What are the challenges in teaching English in primary schools?, And what are solutions of the problems in teaching English in primary schools? Therefore, the research aims are to identify the benefits and challenges in teaching English in primary schools and to find out the solutions related to the problems.

II. THEORETICAL REVIEW

A. *The Younger, The Better*

Before discussing further the benefits and the challenges in teaching English in primary schools, the writers show several theories and studies which support that learning a foreign language at an early age is better. "Children between three and six years of age are at the optimal age for learning foreign languages, because, when children learn their first language, they can use the same method to learn foreign languages" [5]. Besides, the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) claims that there is a biological timetable for foreign language acquisition which can be done more optimally.

Consequently, if it is acquired after the optimal period, it will become more challenging to learn the language. The optimal period is 2-14 years of age [10]. It means that more than 14 years of age or adults will have more challenges when they learn English. In another reference, most schools start teaching a foreign language to the students at the age of 8-9 [11]. They believe that in those ages, learners will not fail to learn a foreign language because it is the best period to gain knowledge from the teacher.

Furthermore, "pre-school children have brains which are more active, connected, and flexible than adults'" [12]. It means that children like to move and play, are creative and imaginative, and have an excellent social skill. Thus, the English teaching and learning process in class will be more successful if English teachers take into account their learners' needs and can identify the learners' backgrounds such as environment, culture, and interest.

Age is not the only factor that facilitates young learners to learn a language quickly [13]. Other factors that can also determine the success of English introduction in primary schools are motivation, language aptitude, and quality of the teachers, learning strategies, socioeconomic background, learning materials, and media, social interaction, and family background [4]. It means that if young learners do not have motivation in learning English and their aptitude is not supported even when they are young; it seems that they will get difficulties to learn it. It also happens in the quality of the teachers, learning strategies, socioeconomic background, learning material and media, social interaction, and family

background. If they do not support them in learning English, success cannot be reached.

By recognizing several factors determining the success in teaching English in primary schools, the teachers are expected to analyze the benefits, challenges, and solutions. The next discussion is how teaching English in primary schools is conducted.

B. *Teaching English in Primary Schools*

Teaching English in primary schools includes one that needs to be underlined. It is because it deals with young learners who have unique characteristics. Several characteristics of young learners are egocentric, imaginative and active, self-centered, get bored easily, and find difficulties to differentiate the concrete and abstract things; they also have a low concentration level, prefer to do their task by themselves, and love to learn new things [4,14,15]. They learn by doing to acquire a new language.

Teaching English in primary schools has several purposes. They are categorized into two major parts, such as interaction and socialization [12]. The aims of interaction are to help children to acquire and use information, like learning how to spell; to help children to acquire other physical skills, such as cutting, handwriting; and help children to acquire complex skills such as reading. Meanwhile, the purposes of socialization are to help children to recognize a wider society, and enable them to mingle with their peers and to work with them. For example, the activities in the class can be done through working in pairs, playing games, singing a song, and the like.

In addition, young learners acquire a language effectively and efficiently if the environment supports them. They will learn through their experiences and activities [16]. It means that they explore their backgrounds and skills to acquire a language more easily because they directly interact with them. As mentioned previously, children also like to make physical movements, so that fun activities such as playing games, singing songs, storytelling, role-playing, and so on can be recommended exercises to help young learners pick up the target language quickly [17]. Other fun learning activities that can be applied by teachers to teach English for young learners can also be found in other references [16], and so on. They propose fun activities like "Get together activities, spider mobile, the giant potato story, learning diaries, matching, and so on."

The next discussion is the main idea of the study mentioned previously. It is the benefits of teaching English in primary schools, challenges, and the solutions of the issues. These ideas are collected from several studies on the teaching of English in primary schools.

C. *Benefits of Teaching English in Primary Schools*

There are several studies conducted under the issue of teaching English in primary schools. They

mention several benefits when learning English in primary schools [10, 16, 18]. All of them agree that teaching English in primary schools will give more advantages rather than the disadvantages. The benefits are in terms of awareness, language aptitude, time, and confidence. Those benefits which are mentioned by the researchers will be discussed further.

In terms of awareness, [16] found that teaching English in primary schools can make the students more aware of their first language. It is so weird, for example, Indonesian students have good English, but their Indonesian language is not sufficient. Therefore, to learn English, Indonesian students should have the basic foundation of communication, which is the Indonesian language as their first language. It means that the role of the Indonesian language is very crucial before the students want to learn English as a foreign language. On the other hand, teaching English in primary schools also makes the students have the possibility of more significant global awareness and intercultural competencies [16, 18]. It means that by learning English, the students can have more opportunities to understand that there are many countries with their cultural differences. It leads the students to have a positive attitude, to be more respectful and tolerant [10, 16]. It is also believed that English as an international language can be one of the effective ways to understand other cultures and communicates with other people from different countries.

Teaching English in primary schools is also beneficial for students to acquire better pronunciation and fluency [18]. It is because, in primary schools, the students have more time to learn the foreign language instruction [10]. If they have a lot of practice to pronounce words in English, better fluency will be reached.

Another benefit is to achieve confidence. Self-confidence is one of the keys to motivate students to learn. When they find difficulties to follow the lesson, it can lower their self-confidence. It is expected that learning English in an early age can be one of the efforts to improve their self-confidence [16]. If they have sufficient knowledge of English, they will be more confident to follow the lesson, for example by answering the teacher's questions.

In addition, children are better learners because learning in their age is going natural, exciting and enjoyable, relevant, social, belongs to the child, multisensory, active and experiential, memorable, etc. [18]. When all of these optimal conditions are provided, they will reach a high achievement in language knowledge.

Based on those findings, several benefits in teaching English in primary schools are found. These findings show that it is better for children to understand that in this world there are many languages

as a means for communication, and which ones belong to the first, second, and the foreign languages. If they understand which ones belong to the first, second, and foreign languages, they will raise their awareness of their first language and a foreign language they are learning. They also will be more confident to speak in English. It is because they have better pronunciation and fluency than others who are not confident in using English.

D. Challenges in Teaching English in Primary Schools

Teaching English in primary schools is not easy since the way how to teach children is different from how to teach adult learners. It also has many challenges [9] [8] [7]. The problems are in terms of internal and external factors. The internal factor refers to pedagogy, motivation, and identity. The external factor includes textbooks, learning resources, teachers' level of English, and class size. Those challenges are discussed below.

The first challenge that relates to the internal factors is a pedagogy competence dealing with the proper use of teaching strategies. Several new learning strategies such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Learning and Teaching (CBLT), and the like exist in language teaching and learning. However, the teachers may find it challenging to introduce those strategies for several reasons [9]. For example, it may be inappropriate for teaching large groups of students where the resources are limited. Therefore, [9] the teachers need to try harder to implement those learning strategies effectively.

In terms of motivation, it is difficult to motivate children to learn the language, because they have different motivations [9]. Some of them may struggle to understand English, while others may not. Also, the progress of the students is not frequently assessed. It brings a bit problem because the assessment is needed to know how far the students understand the lesson. Therefore, if their progress is not frequently assessed, those who have a low proficiency level in English are not interested in learning, and even have no motivation for it. It is worse actually because if they do not have motivation in learning English, it will be difficult for the teacher to explain the materials and involve them in activities. On the other hand, support from parents also plays a vital role for the students [8]. If there is no support from parents in learning English, the students will have no motivation for it.

Another challenge relates to identity. It is not easy to teach English to young learners with global insights, but not keeping them away from national identity. National identity is "a condition in which a mass of people make the same identification with national symbols – have internalized the symbols of the nation" [19]. It regards that every country has its uniqueness of the national identity; they are different

from one another. It means that by understanding Indonesian and local languages, the students are proud of their country. However, to make the students proud of their national identity when they are learning English is not easy to do. For example, they are interested more in foreign culture rather than in their culture. That is why sometimes in a writing activity, instead of writing the history of things in Indonesia; they write the history of Eiffel Tower.

The second challenge is one of the external factors, i.e., textbooks. In several counties, the books are not available [8]. It creates another problem; textbooks play an important role in supporting the students to acquire knowledge on English. In Indonesia, the government has decided to use textbooks, but it does not limit the use of another one which can support the teacher in teaching the lesson. However, in the selected textbooks found in the school, the materials were often poorly organized and illustrated [7]. It is also known that the existence of appropriate materials can support the teachers to prepare the activities to be used in teaching-learning activities. Regarding this, the content or the lesson from textbooks or other sources of learning needs to be adapted based on the students' needs and skills and is simply designed so that the teachers and the students can easily follow the path.

In terms of source, children need to be explained concretely through demonstrations and realia. It means that they need something real rather than theories [9]. They need media that can help them understand the lesson. However, most of the schools do not have sufficient teaching aids [8]. It will create a problem if there are no adequate media and teaching aids; the teachers are not able to provide fun activities which engage the students' physical movements.

Next, the teachers' English proficiency can influence their teaching. In other words, those who have a low proficiency level are indicated to lack self-confidence, find difficulties to interact with children, and understand the materials slowly [9]. Therefore, the teachers who have no sufficient knowledge in teaching English, especially to teach young learners need some training which can help them develop their competencies. However, most of the English teachers joining the training felt dissatisfied. One of the reasons is they are not well trained using the concerned method [7, 8]. It brings another problem when the training does not facilitate the teacher well, in terms of how they can improve their competencies. Those problems raise serious issues about the overall quality of teaching English in primary schools. Therefore, providing appropriate training for English teachers who teach in primary schools can help them to be ready with various characteristics of their students.

Then, the size of the class is believed as a common challenge. The larger the class, the more

difficulties the teachers find and it is hard to create learner-centered learning. Otherwise, if the size of the room is too small or not appropriate for the number of the students, they will get difficulties to move, so they do not have enough space to do their activities [9].

Based on those findings, the challenges come from many aspects. Therefore, the government together with the teachers and the schools' committee take into account those challenges by finding the solutions so that the better quality in teaching English in primary schools can be reached.

E. Solutions of the Challenges in Teaching English in Primary Schools

Based on the several challenges presented previously, the writers propose several solutions to those challenges found in teaching English in primary schools. They are based on several theories [4,14,15,16,17].

The first solution is that it is better for stakeholders having a responsibility for the issue of teaching English to young learners to provide some training for English teachers of primary schools. The training also needs to be well designed and prepared, such as by providing a competent trainer, appropriate materials, and a proper method. It is because teachers who teach young learners are different from the teacher teaching adult learners. Some qualifications of English teachers in primary schools should be fulfilled [4,20]. The qualifications mentioned are: teachers should have adequate English skills and develop the competencies all time; they are multitalented and conduct assessment and manage their English class well; they are patient, kind, friendly, humorist, and highly energetic; they are professional and want to join activities which can develop their skills, such as training or workshops; and they communicate effectively with children, colleagues, parents, and so on.

Secondly, to motivate the students in learning English, the teachers need to understand the students' characteristics because they are still young and they need to get a special treatment from the teachers. Several experts also explain young learner's aspects [4,14,15]. Therefore, if the teachers understand their students' personalities, they can encourage their students to be interested in learning English, because different nature will need a different treatment. For example, the teachers can provide activities which are interesting and enjoyable, belong to the child, active and experiential, memorable, and so on [18].

Dealing with inappropriate textbooks and teaching aids for the primary school level, the English teachers are required to be creative in class because they still have to provide fun learning activities. Several recommended fun learning activities in teaching English to young learners are storytelling, games, songs, mini role play, and so on. The important thing is that English teachers need to be selective in

choosing and using textbooks and media to support their teaching-learning activities, especially in teaching young learners. They need to decide whether the content, materials, and lessons are appropriate for the students and their language skills. For example, the teachers can provide topics talking about foreign countries as the input and other issues discussing whatever related to the students' country as an output [21]. That is to show that national identity is important; although the students are learning a foreign language, they do not lose and forget it. Moreover, for English teachers, they should have an open-minded thought for asking, learning, trying a new thing, and improving their competencies to help their students [16][17]. Furthermore, it is essential to anticipate the lack of learning sources, because those will be used to support the teaching-learning process in class.

Next, English teachers are required to design the class as comfortable as possible because the students like to move around and the physical movements will dominate the activities [16][17]. Sometimes, teachers also need to design an outdoor activity to introduce the surrounding environment to the students. They also need to take into account the existence of a report book for reporting the students' progress since they learn English. It is crucial for the teachers to be the basis in designing the activities which are appropriate for the students' needs and skills.

Finally, another duty of the teachers is to explain to parents that English is also prominent to learn because it is an international language in today's era. They can convince the parents by showing that many students can be successful in learning English, for example, by joining an international debate competition, and the like. If the parents finally support their children to learn English, the teachers have to provide more enjoyable and fun activities, not complicated and boring ones.

III. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In brief, teaching English in primary schools is not easy. Stakeholders need to take into account the problems and challenges found, not only the teaching-learning process in the class but also people's point of view on the importance of English. Besides, there are also several benefits found if English is introduced and taught in primary schools. It means that teaching English in primary schools gives more benefits to the students because they will have more time and chances to learn English. Teaching English in the primary level provides children more opportunities to understand foreign cultures and to be more tolerant to others [10], but it needs to be well prepared and organized so that several challenges mentioned above can be handled and good quality English teaching and learning can be achieved.

In short, English teachers for young learners need to know habit, characteristics, and learners' needs in order to be able to improve their competencies and

teaching performance. In addition, open-minded thought, willingness to ask, reading habit, and curiosity to open a dictionary will make them professional in their expertise, especially teaching primary students.

In addition, the next study under the same issue is expected to be able to measure or to analyze within a broader context. It is because the researchers realize that this study has a few preliminary studies under the same issue to know further the benefits and challenges in teaching English to primary students. Therefore, the solutions provided are not yet sufficient. Thus, the use of more comprehensive methods and both quantitative and qualitative approaches can be one of the suggestions to have broader and more explicit findings. Survey studies may be used to explore the perceptions of stakeholders who get involved in the development of teaching English in primary schools. Another research could be an ethnographic observation study which may be used to explore the actual practices of teaching English in primary schools, not only in the big city but also in the rural area.

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