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A Study of Parental Perception towards the Removal of English from Primary Schools' Local Content Curriculum

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***Abstract*—Early introduction of English in the schooling system has become prevalent in this globalized world. The notion that English is required for highly competitive societies put the government under pressure to articulate an early primary school English program. It is commonly perceived that there is more opportunity for the children to acquire high proficiency in a target language when they are exposed earlier to that language. The increasing demands of parents who see English as the key to their children's educational success have become another pressure. In Indonesian context, regardless of the shortage of EFL teachers at schools, parents insist that the schools have to teach English. Furthermore, they challenged the school to teach English as one of the core subjects instead of putting it as an additional subject or the so-called Local Content Subject (LC). However, current curriculum (2013 Curriculum) policy has excluded English as an LC subject. Most schools have removed the English teaching from their schools; given that the subject is no more included in primary school curriculum. This study aimed at investigating parents' perception towards this removal. It revealed that despite their challenge towards necessitating schools to put English as a core subject, parents agreed to a certain extent that English should at least exists as school subject as it did, a local content subject. They argued that having English as an LC is much better than having their children not learning English at all. Their belief about the implication of the removal of English from school subjects would result in detrimental effects; such as delayed mastery of English which in turn will make their children less competitive in the world of work.**

Keywords—curriculum policy; curriculum change; English removal; parental perception

I. INTRODUCTION

The introduction of English education to children in the early age of schooling has become trending topic in this globalized world. Government or their agencies articulate an early primary school English program due to pressures from society or parents that see English as a required skill their children should master [1]. This is in line with the theoretical proposition suggesting that the earlier a child learns a target language, the better her/his opportunity in acquiring a high proficiency in that language [2-4].

Parental pressure on the introduction of English education is also the case of Indonesia [5]. Regardless of the availability of English teachers, parents insist that the primary schools have to include English teaching in their school curricula. In the 2006 curriculum, which was widely known as KTSP or School-Based Curriculum, English was an elective subject, and was included as one that can be taken as a Local Content (LC) subject. LC is a set of curricular activities aimed at developing students' competencies suited to peculiarity or distinctive characteristics of the district or area where the school is located. This peculiarity makes the materials cannot be embedded in any of the core subjects taught at Indonesian Primary Schools comprising of Religious Education, Civics, Indonesian Language, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts and Crafts, and Health and Physical Education; therefore, it becomes another subject [6]. English for primary school is included as one of LC [7].

In many provinces, including South Sulawesi province, schools were required to decide to teach English as the obligatory LC subject instead of another elective one. Such parental pressure was dominant in shaping the schools' decision to adopt English in their curriculum. Other reason was because there existed a perception that the adoption of English would increase the schools' prestige [8]. Therefore, there was no room for the schools to account whether primary school students really need English and whether they are interested in learning it [5]. The status of English remained as an LC, although many parents discoursed that English be enhanced to be taught as a core subject at schools.

Curriculum changed in 2013, but little was known in the literature until the early 2014. The 2013 curriculum emerged for the purpose of replacing the 2006 curriculum. One of the significant changes from the previous curriculum is about the teaching of English as an LC. Despite denial from the government about the instruction for the cancellation of English teaching in primary schools, English has de-facto been removed from the primary LC curriculum. The researcher's observation in some regions of South Sulawesi Province indicated that most primary schools, if not all, have removed the teaching of English as an LC subject. This removal has invited various reactions. Earlier in 2012, the House of Representatives of Indonesia has indicated their agreement on

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the cancellation of the teaching of English in Indonesian primary schools [9]. More reactions were from parents and community organisations. Most parents demanded the schools to teach English regardless of its status in the primary school curriculum. This phenomenon is to be investigated in this study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Early Childhood English Education

The introduction of English language teaching in primary schools might have been the world's biggest policy development in education [10]. This trend is due to a number of reasons. One is a notion that the earlier language learning takes place, the better [11,12]. Another reason is the response to the increasing demand for the provision of an English-speaking workforce as a result of global economic development [11,13]. Still, another cause is the demand from parents that schools provide English learning for their children [14].

The notion that earlier language learning is better was evident in Diem's study in Palembang, Indonesia [15]. Diem studied the comparison between the achievement of Primary School and Junior Secondary School students who have the same start in learning English. She found that the primary school students' achievement scored higher than those from junior secondary schools. This implied that learners who started earlier in EFL learning have better achievement in EFL than older learners. In other words, elementary pupils are better foreign language learners compared to the older learners [15]. This is consistent with a study Shannon and Milian that indicated that early English education facilitates young children learn better English communication skills [16].

B. Factors Affecting the Removal of English Teaching in Primary Schools

Despite the promising indication that learning English will have a successful output, some studies showed otherwise. Since the introduction of LC curriculum in 1994, there have been some initial difficulties in its implementation. The World Bank reported the shortcomings of Indonesian basic education system including LC, which adversely influences its quality. One among the identified shortcomings is that many teachers were poorly trained in both subject matter and teaching practices. Furthermore, incentive structures did not reward good teaching practices; so the teachers took on outside jobs that in many occasions conflicted with the aim of good teaching. Other identified shortcomings were that the curriculum was overloaded and unintegrated; resources were insufficient; the quality of textbooks and materials was low; and assessment was inadequate. In addition, the separation of responsibility for primary education between the Ministry of National Education who is in charge of technical, educative aspects, and the Ministry of Home Affairs which is in charge of administrative functions has worsened the condition [17].

Other research studies in different parts of Indonesia, such as in East Java [18], Yogyakarta [19,20], South Sumatera [21], and Bengkulu [22] found that the main obstacle in its implementation was the teachers' lack of understanding of the concepts of LC; therefore, they were not capable of providing teaching materials that suit the students' environment. Other identified obstacles were the shortages of teachers, insufficient guidelines, and students' low interest in learning LCs [23]. Yuwono's study identified some problems in ELT in primary schools such as teacher's qualification, time availability, the number of students in classroom, and available resources and facilities [24].

As an LC, English also suffers from these problems, particularly the shortage of EFL teachers. Since it was introduced in 1994, there seems to have been no consideration of who is going to teach the subject. To overcome the shortage of EFL teachers, some schools have assigned primary school teachers of other subjects to teach English; some recruited fresh graduates of English education from universities to be voluntary EFL teachers; and some teachers have to teach English at more than one school. It is generally acknowledged that university graduates of English education in Indonesia are not prepared to teach elementary students, but for the secondary level of education. With such a situation, non EFL and voluntary teachers may find themselves challenged in teaching English with an adequate pedagogical knowledge to students at primary level [5].

A study conducted on the development of context-based English learning resources for elementary schools in Central Java revealed that teachers face many significant issues in teaching EFL as an LC, such as their reliance on textbooks as their primary teaching resources. The textbooks available were not always of a high quality, and the contents were not always appropriate for the mandated curriculum and the students' socio-cultural environments. The study also revealed that teachers did not always write their own syllabuses and lesson plans. They often copied them from other teachers whose schools have different conditions. This was worsened by the fact that some teachers did not know how to interpret the intended curriculum [25].

A survey study on the qualification of primary school English teachers in ten out of 24 regencies of South Sulawesi in Indonesia, and revealed that 51 percent of the English teachers of the ten regencies had never attended English teacher training college, only 21 percent had already attended English training, and 68 percent of them had English teaching experience of less than five years [26]. The data indicated that most of them do not have sufficient knowledge and skill in teaching English to young learners. They may not be trained with the skill and ability to innovate teaching strategies and teaching materials suitable to young learners [26].

There are lots of challenges teachers may encounter in teaching English to young learners [27]. Employing a mixed-methods approach with five different sites: Colombia, Italy, South Korea, Tanzania, and the United Arab Emirates; the study concluded that globally, teachers are challenged, partly by lack of training, partly by lack of knowledge, and partly by lack of resources. Other challenges that emerged are more restricted to local contexts, such class sizes, teachers' own skills and confidence in using English, and time pressures [27].

Some other challenges in implementing programs on teaching English to young learners include unrealistic expectations of outcomes, demands for immediate results, and insufficient professional support [28]. These challenges indicate that it is important for stakeholders to be realistic about the targets in the time allocated for English and avoid pressures on teachers to produce an immediate result before the program has had enough time to run a reasonable length. In addition, teachers need proper professional support from the government with adequate curriculum guidelines in which aims and expected outcomes are clear, appropriate sample materials are provided, appropriate methods are recommended for use at primary levels, and guidance is given on appropriate assessment techniques.

Those studies seemed to contribute to the cancellation of the teaching of English in Indonesian primary schools. The government see that most Indonesian primary schools are not ready to teach English appropriately because of the insufficient numbers of English teachers for primary schools.

III. Research Methods

This qualitative study investigates parents' perception towards the removal of English subject from Indonesian primary school curriculum. Five parents comprising of two fathers and three mothers participated in this study. They were given pseudonym as Papa Ivan, Papa Romy, Mama Ismi, Mama Vio, and Mama Lucy. The primary data collection instrument employed in this study is face-to-face interviews. Telephone interviews were also conducted to clarify some participants' ideas after face-to-face interviews. The current research focuses on examining parents' values and beliefs in depth. They were interviewed individually to acquire comprehensive knowledge of their perceptions. An interpretive phenomenological approach is employed to understand human subjective experiences and obtain in-depth insights into human nature [29]. The theoretical frame of this study is constructed upon the main research question: **What are the parents' perceptions towards the removal of English from Indonesian primary school curriculum?** To provide a deeper and accurate picture of the parent's beliefs, the following sub-objectives are also examined:

- Parents' perceptions towards their children's early learning of English.
- Parents' perceptions towards the cancellation of the teaching of English from primary schools.

IV. Results and Discussion

A. *Parental Perception towards Children's Early Learning of English*

All participants were positive about the teaching of English in early childhood. They explored the reasons why young children need to learn English in the early years. They believed that children need to master English from early schooling. They perceived that the earlier their children are exposed to English the better chance for them to have a good competence in that language. Papa Ivan said:

> It is absolutely good for my children to start studying English from primary [school]. My elder son started doing his English when he was at Year 4. Now, I see him doing very well with his English in Year 10. He can speak English well. He is always elected as a member of school team for English debating championship.

In addition, Mama Lucy emphasized that children are able to build up their English skills naturally when they are exposed to English. As a parent, she admitted that she is less attentive about her children's English learning and acquisition. But, she proudly informed that her daughter who is already at Junior High School has a good command of English, particularly in writing. She said:

> I did not actually provide any specific attention to my daughter's learning of English because I found that she has a strong ability to learn. I remember when she was starting to learn English at Year 4. She did not know English at all. But, she seemed to have a very high motivation, and she was able to communicate in English after a short time.

Most participants highlighted the importance of mastering English from the early age of schooling. Children's English education is a family matter. The benefits are not merely for the children themselves, but also for parents. Mama Vio, for example, attested that having her son capable of using English means prestige for her family. "Having our son able to communicate in English is a pride for all family members," she said.

The study further explored why participants perceive it is important for their children to start learning English as early as possible. Having competence in communicating in English is considered as an efficient way to achieve better lifestyles in the future. Papa Romy believes that mastering English probably will lead to well-paid professions, such as diplomat, and business company manager. Such professions usually require applicants to have a good command of English. To achieve the goals of having a good profession, parents need to prepare their children's education from an early age, including learning English.

Mama Ismi is a relatively young mother in her thirties. She believes that education makes differences in people's lives. According to her opinion, it might be inappropriate to give lots of burden for her young children in academic learning, but getting children ready to learn academic skills is still vital. She said:

> I don't force my children, but you know, education really makes different to our lives. If you master English language, it really makes differences. You can get job easily because most of high-class professions require English. As parents, you cannot force your children to learn English seriously, but you expect them to do that.

From all perspectives above, it can be inferred that parents underline the importance of early learning of English. It is obvious that they are consistent with the notion that the earlier children learn English, the better result will be [11,12].

B. Parents' Perceptions towards the Cancellation of English Teaching in Primary Schools

The emergence of the Indonesian 2013 curriculum marked the cancellation of the teaching of English in primary schools. Although there was no government legislation about the cancellation, most schools have already excluded English from their LC curriculum. The discourses on this exclusion are dominated by a main reason; that early teaching of foreign languages might affect the teaching of Indonesian national language, Bahasa Indonesia. There was a tendency that students were more interested in studying English as Foreign Language than studying Bahasa Indonesia. The national language policy suggests that schools have to prioritize the teaching of the national language, and not until the students have appropriate mastery of the language may the schools teach other languages, including English.

The participants of this study deplored the cancellation. They did not want to understand the reason why the schools stopped teaching English in primary schools. Papa Romy said:

> This is unintelligent. What on earth is the reason for the removal of English? We, parents, do not really understand the reason. This is the era of global competition. What language will our children use in dealing with their business. How can they compete if they do not have a good command in English? So, whoever has the authority, please bring it [English] back.

Three participants, Mama Ismi, Mama Vio, and Mama Lucy addressed their concern on how their children can learn English after the schools do not teach English anymore. Mama Lucy said:

> I don't want my kids left behind. Now that the schools have stopped teaching English, what I should do? Taking them to an English course is not a good option. Most English courses teach grammar in a big portion, and neglect the teaching of speaking. I want my kids learning English for communication. Having a private tutor? No, I can't afford to pay [laugh].

Mama Vio argued that there is nothing to worry about when the children other languages at the same time they learn Bahasa Indonesia. She said, "What I should worry about? My daughter is going well in both subjects, even in all subjects." This is in line with what Alhussein and Milian studied, suggesting that children can learn a second language successfully at the same time when they are learning the first language [30].

The issue of the shortage of primary EFL teachers has also become the parents' concern. But, they maintained that this is not the right reason for the government or schools to cancel the teaching of English in primary schools. Rather, they seem to blame the educational institutions, such as universities that do not educate students to be primary EFL teachers. Mama Lucy said:

> What universities have done? They keep preparing their students to be high school English teachers. That's old fashioned. Do research! Come to us, and we will tell you that we really need primary EFL teachers to educate our children. The government is supposed not to close their eyes on this matter. We got so many unemployed alumni from English education. They can train them to teach English in primary [school] for immediate need. For the long run, they can collaborate with universities to prepare teacher candidates for primary EFL.

The fact showed that most English teachers who taught primary EFL in the previous curriculum were high school teachers. Papa Ivan said:

> My elder son was taught by a high school teacher. No problem at all. He is very capable, and he seemed to know how to teach younger kids. My son was getting along with this teacher. I know him personally because he occasionally discussed my son's learning progress with me when I picked up my son.

From what the participants perceive about the removal of English from primary school curriculum, there seem to be no apology for the policy makers except that they bring English back in primary school classroom. Parental perception on this matter neglects the fear of English teaching that will interfere the teaching and learning the national language, Bahasa Indonesia. Rather, the fear should be based on the impact that might happen due to the absence of English teaching in primary schools.

V. CONCLUSION

It is evident that parents agree and adopt the notion of the excellence of the early foreign language learning. Their concern is that their children learn English as early as possible to avoid the delay of the language mastery. Mastering English earlier will facilitate their children to competitive in the world of work, and other business competitions. They perceived that their children are capable of learning other languages the same time they learn the national language without any interferences.

The cessation of the English teaching in primary schools as the impact of the implementation of the 2013 curriculum is viewed as a step back, and will result in a detrimental effect, such as the delay mastery of English which in turn will impede their children success in the future. Therefore, they recommend policy makers to restate the urgency of teaching English in primary schools.

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