

Problems in Learning English Faced by Elementary School Students in Jambi City

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ABSTRACT

Considering the importance of learning English since early ages, some elementary schools in Jambi City administer English as one of the local contents. However, based on the preliminary observation, many students encountered a number of problems in learning English that needs further exploration. This study aims at finding out problems faced by the elementary schools students in Jambi City in learning English. This study used a descriptive method taking teachers and students from seven elementary schools in Jambi City as the respondents. The data were collected using questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires were distributed to the students through Google form, and the interviews were conducted to teachers of the seven elementary schools. The data were analyzed quantitatively. The results show that the problems faced by the students are: (i) lack of vocabulary; (ii) pronunciation difficulties; (iii) unexpected learning atmosphere; and (iv) less motivation. The findings suggest the need of more creative teachers who are technologically literate and easily adaptable to the students' problems in learning English.

Keywords: *Learning problems, English learning, elementary school students*

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the important role of English in global business, technology, science, education and media [1], [2], a number of countries in the world, including Indonesia, make efforts to build their citizens' English proficiency. One of the tangible efforts is providing English education as early as possible. In Central and Eastern European countries, for example, English is formally taught to students at all levels of education: at elementary schools, high schools, and universities [3]. In In Japan, Korea, and most of countries in Asia, learning English in formal education starts at the fourth- grade of elementary school [4], [5].

However, in Indonesia, English that used to be taught at all levels of education is no longer listed as one of the required subjects in the latest national curriculum for elementary school. This certainly leads to pros and cons among educators throughout Indonesia. The reason of Indonesian language maintenance communicated by the policy makers is firmly criticized by public. The policy is considered illogical because of two perspectives. From practical perspective, English is a language of global science and technology [1], so English mastery is one of the requirements to compete in science and technology development. From theoretical perspective, a number of studies have proved that the best time for learning a foreign language is since early ages [6]–[8].

There are at least three theories underlying the need of learning English at early ages: language acquisition device theory [9], critical period hypothesis theory [10], and

affective theory [11]. According to language acquisition device (LAD) theory, the LAD, naturally possessed by everyone since their birth, help them learn any language at any time without encountering difficulties. Therefore, learning English should not hinder elementary school students from learning other elementary subjects. According to critical period hypothesis theory, the children's brain elasticity is so biologically high that it is very easy for them to master any language exposed to them. According to affective theory, children have good affective condition, so they will be less anxious, less nervous, and less stressful in learning a foreign language.

The three theories mentioned above strengthen the necessity of learning English in elementary school level. Therefore, despite being eliminated from the national curriculum for elementary school, English continues to be administered as one of the subjects in several elementary schools in Indonesia [12], [13], including in Jambi City. However, English teachers should work much harder to design the learning materials provided to the students because the consequence of being unlisted in the national curriculum is the absence of nationally standardized curriculum for English subject.

In Jambi City, English is taught mostly in private elementary schools. Demands from parents, suggestions from stake holders (junior high school English teachers), and some underlying theories are the main factors to include English as one of the subjects in the private elementary schools in Jambi City. However, based on the authors' preliminary observation, many students

encountered difficulties in learning English. Therefore, this study aims at finding out the problems encountered by elementary school students in Jambi City in learning English.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive method, conducted in 4 private elementary schools in Jambi City, the capital of Jambi Province, Indonesia. They were selected because they were the elementary schools in Jambi City that administer English as one of the school subjects. The data were the results of interviews and the questionnaires. The participants were 14 teachers and 163 fifth- and sixth-grade students at the private elementary schools in Jambi. The participants were selected using a total sampling technique. The data were collected using interviews and questionnaires. The interviews were carried to teachers, while the questionnaires were distributed to students. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the questionnaires were distributed online using Google form.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of data analysis show that there are four problems faced by the students at private elementary schools in Jambi. The first problem is lack of vocabulary. The results of the questionnaire related to the problem of vocabulary can be seen in Figure 1.

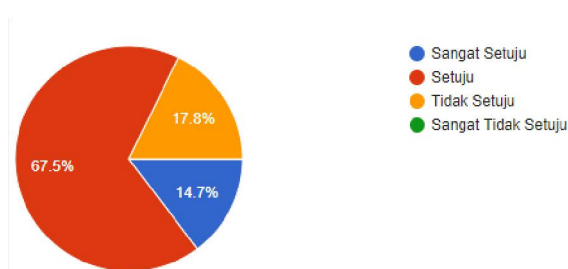


Figure 1 Students' vocabulary problem

The chart in Figure 1 shows that 82.2% of the respondents agree that they lack of vocabulary mastery. In terms of their agreement, 14.7% of the respondents respond "strongly agree", and the other 67.6% respond "agree". The results show that vocabulary is a serious problem faced by the elementary school students in learning English. The results of this study support the previous studies done by Setiawan [14] and Suri [15] who found that vocabulary is the main problem faced by elementary school students.

Nevertheless, vocabulary-related problem is a serious problem that needs closer attention in English learning because vocabulary mastery affects the learning of the four language skills [16]. Previous studies have emphasized on the important role in helping students build and improve their English skills [17]–[22]. Without the appropriate and sufficient knowledge of vocabulary, students cannot express their own feelings [22].

The results of the questionnaire are supported by the results of the interview. The teachers stated that

vocabulary is the problem that hinders the smooth process of English learning at the elementary school. Most of the students have limited amount of vocabulary. Therefore, in addition to providing materials related to other linguistic elements, the learning process mostly focuses on building the students' vocabulary mastery.

The second problem encountered by the elementary school students in Jambi City in learning English is pronouncing English words. The results of the questionnaire related to the difficulties in pronunciation are presented in Figure 2.

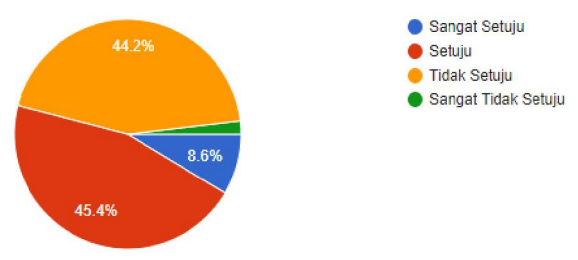


Figure 2 Students' problem in pronunciation

The chart in Figure 2 shows that most of the students (54%) agree that pronunciation presents difficulties to them. 8.6% of the students respond "strongly agree", and the other 45.4% of them respond "agree". This is quite natural since English words are not pronounced as they are spelled. In their mother tongue, bahasa Indonesia, words are pronounced as they are spelled. Moreover, the problem is also motivated by the absence of some English sounds in their mother tongue, such as /ʃ/, /dʒ/, /θ/, /ð/, etc. The results of the study are in line with the results of previous studies reporting that pronunciation is the problem frequently faced by students in learning English either as a second language or as a foreign language [23]–[26].

In learning English, pronunciation affects the students' ability in performing their oral skills, listening and speaking. Pronunciation determines the students' understanding of English sounds and their ability to speak. In other words, poor pronunciation makes them unable to communicate in English properly. On the other hand, having good pronunciation can develop their confidence in performing their English oral skills [23].

The results of the questionnaire are in line with the results of the interview with the teachers. The teachers' instructions are sometimes not understood by the students because of their poor pronunciation, and their expressions are not comprehensible because of their poor pronunciation. In addition, the results of the interview also show that sometimes the students understand the meaning of English vocabulary when it is written, but they can understand it when it is pronounced. This indicates that the problem of pronunciation-spelling difference in English is the factor leading to students' problem in pronouncing English words.

The third problem encountered by the elementary school students in Jambi City in learning English is learning atmosphere. Most of the students agree that the learning atmosphere does not support their achievement in English

mastery. The results of the questionnaire related to poor learning atmosphere are displayed in Figure 3.

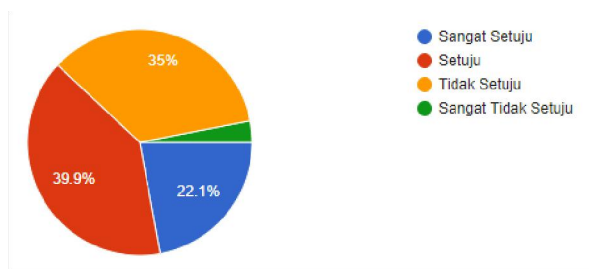


Figure 3 Problem in English learning atmosphere

The chart in Figure 3 shows that most of the students (52%) agree that the learning atmosphere does not support the English learning process. 22.1% of the students “strongly agree” that the learning atmosphere is supportive to their English mastery, while the other 39.9% of them are in “agree” category. This shows that learning atmosphere is one of the considerable factors in building students’ English proficiency. Learning atmosphere includes the duration of English, the classmates, the teachers, and the technique and materials used by the teacher. The students only learn English once a week with the duration of 70 minutes. This is a very short duration since teaching English at elementary schools focuses more on practice. The results of the questionnaire related to English learning duration in the private elementary schools in Jambi are presented in Figure 4.

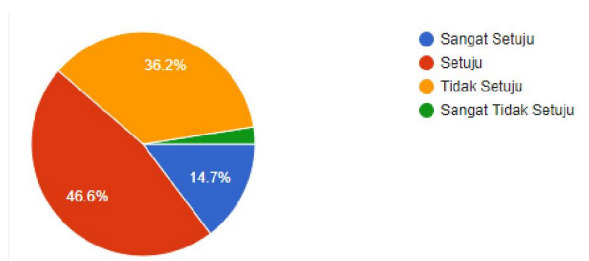


Figure 4 Teaching English more than once a week

The chart in Figure 4 shows that most of the students (61.3%) agree to study English more than once a week. 14.7% of the students are in the “strongly agree” category, and the other 46.9% of them are in the “agree” category. This indicates that the students need more time to be engaged in English class. The other factor of learning atmosphere leading to students’ problem in learning English is the teaching media used by the teacher. Although using several games in teaching, the most desirable teaching technique to young learners, the teacher tends to use conventional media as the teaching aids. Meanwhile, the students are born in advanced technology era, so most of them are more motivated when the materials are delivered using multimedia such as animated pictures or videos. The results of questionnaire related to the multimedia-based teaching technique desired by the students are displayed in Figure 5.

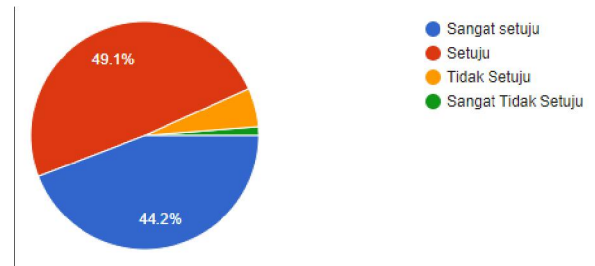


Figure 5 The need of multimedia in English learning

The chart in Figure 5 shows that almost all students (93.3%) need multimedia such as animated pictures or videos as the teaching media used in learning English. 44.2% of the students are in the “strongly agree” category, while the other 49.1% of them are in the “agree” category. The need of multimedia-based teaching technique is also mentioned in many previous studies [27]–[30]. Zhen [28] argues that the use of multimedia can solve the problem of students’ low motivation and low efficiency in English learning.

The less use of multimedia in teaching English at elementary schools in Jambi City is also confirmed by the results of interview with the teachers. In addition, the problem is also caused by the school’s incomplete facility that can support the use of multimedia. For example, the school has limited number of computers and projectors, so the teachers can only use the projectors or computers when they are not being used by other teachers. Besides, some teachers still have low ability of creating multimedia-based learning materials.

The other factor leading to unpleasant learning atmosphere is the learning materials used by the teachers. The materials provided by the teachers are only taken from the available textbooks. They design the syllabus by themselves following the order of the chapters in the textbook. As a result, some materials are considered too difficult by the students. For example, in one of the elementary schools in Jambi, the students are introduced to eight kinds of tenses. They are asked to memorize the rules or formula of each tense. This is really hard for them, and this is not in accordance with the objective of English learning by young learners (elementary school students). Therefore, many students feel less motivated and bored in learning English.

The inappropriate learning materials provided to the students are also confirmed by the results of interview with the teachers. One of the problems leading to such appropriateness is the absence of national curriculum for English at elementary school. Therefore, they have to design the syllabus by themselves. Some of them believe that the good materials should be the ones that have been standardized, and one of which is a published textbook.

The fourth problem encountered by the elementary school students in Jambi City in learning English is less motivation. This problem is related to several problems that have been mentioned earlier such as the teaching technique and the learning materials. The point of the questionnaire concerning this problem is whether the

students find it interesting in learning English whose results are presented in Figure 6.

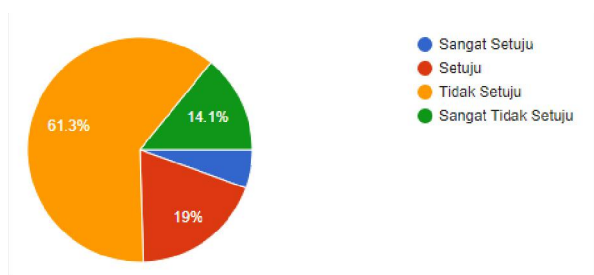


Figure 6 The students' less motivation in learning English

The chart in Figure 6 shows that most of the students (75.4%) disagree that the English learning process is interesting. 14.1% of the students are in the "strongly disagree" category, and 61.3% of them are in the "disagree" category. This indicates that they are less motivated or have low motivation in learning English. The results of this study are in line with the results of the research done by Win [31] who found that motivation is a common problem in teaching-learning English. However, the results of this study are in contrast with the expected learning process. The students are expected to have good motivation in learning. Many studies report that motivation is a very important factor in enhancing the students' English proficiency [21], [32], [33]. Once the students are motivated, they can develop themselves faster in English mastery.

Elementary school students are young learners that need more motivation in learning English. They need more interesting, fun and enjoyable learning process. They need to be actively involved in the learning process. They do not like lecturing method. This is a problem as well as a challenge to elementary school English teachers in order to be more creative in teaching. They should make their best efforts to design a desired teaching technique and material in order to generate their students' motivation.

The students' less motivation in learning English is also confirmed by the results of interview with the teachers. They report that many students look less motivated while learning process. When asked the factors leading to such undesirable condition, the teachers say that the students have different motives in learning English. Some of them learn English because it is one of the subjects offered in the school. Others say that they want to learn English in order to understand several instructions in playing games. Therefore, when the materials given to them are not as they expect, they become lazy and look indifferent during the learning process. The teachers also argue that it is impossible for them to accommodate various students' needs and purposes in learning English. These responses are partially true, but such responses cannot be the right answer to solve the students' motivation problem. Interesting teaching techniques can be a solution to this problem. Sometimes, something undesirable can be interesting when it is served in an interesting manner. The students cannot be blamed for having less motivation, but

creative teachers will find good solutions to overcome such learning condition.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The decision to keep teaching English in elementary schools certainly bears some consequences, one of which is a commitment to make the students have English proficiency. Various problems arise, but the problems should not become the barrier to continue teaching English in elementary schools. The results of this study find four main problems encountered by elementary school students in learning English: lack of vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, unexpected learning atmosphere, and less motivation. These problems should not be regarded as the obstacle of teaching English to elementary school students, but they should be considered as the challenge to make the teachers more creative and skilled in English teaching. Based on the results of the study it is suggested that English learning should be packaged in such an interesting way that makes the students more motivated in learning English. The teachers should always developed themselves by learning and learning to always make the English learning atmosphere more interesting and more enjoyable. Although this is not an easy task, good teachers will certainly find the most applicable and desirable way of teaching.

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