

## While Our Children are not Learning English in Elementary Schools.....

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### Abstract

The decision on the English provision in our elementary schools has been made through the statement of the minister and his deputy. Some parties have finally been happy with it, some more have been the opposite and the rest may not care. It is understandable that the policy has been a controversy due to some factors. The implementation of the policy vary from real successes to complete failures. The number of elementary schools is huge, no wonder that it presents us with problems in treating the schools with equal attention and measurement. Therefore, it has not been a simple decision for the government to make. The fact that the policy has no adequate follow up from the government in terms of the human resources and the teaching and learning supports should also be considered. In short, the teaching of English to the elementary schools is not something simple to work on. In other words, simply taking away the right to learn English from the children may affect their future in their attempts to be global citizens. Similarly, providing them with English without care and cautions will not be beneficial as well. Therefore, this paper will examine the topic exhaustively so that it will be clear for everyone and helps us to make better decision.

Key words : English, elementary school, provision

### Introduction

English in the elementary School and the policy of the provision has become some controversy for the past few years. Officially the controversy ended when the minister of education stated in one of his visit to the Yogyakarta State University that English can be an extra curricular subject in the elementary schools. This statement was also supported by the vice minister's statement that English in elementary schools will be eliminated. The reason put forward to justify the policy might not be very clear and sometimes very naive. One of the mostly quoted is that the English provision might endanger the education of the national language or the local languages which in turn will influence the establishment of their identity and citizenship.

Some people welcomed the decision warmly, some others quietly disagreed, some were very sad, but some might not care. As focused research studies have never been done intensively by the government, no valid and adequate information is available for everyone to be examined. Obviously some educational policy makers tend to change the policy although As an teacher trainer for English for young learners, the policy has put the national education as a kind of setback due to several reasons. This paper will examine each issue to provide us with the detailed information so as to put forward the whole picture of the provision of English in the elementary schools in Indonesia. As a closing some ideas resulting from experiences and literature are put forward.

### The teaching of English In the world

The growing trend to use English as international language has influenced countries all over the world. According to Brewster (2004) English now has official status in sixty countries and a prominent position in twenty more other countries. She also adds that a worldwide survey of English teaching to young learners has informed us that education practitioners have seen the need for English language learning in the elementary level and to make some efforts on it like in South Korea and other countries. In the global level the aims of primary language learning can be classified into three headings: psychological

preparation, linguistic preparation and cultural preparation. It means that English is not only introduced as language but also as a means for the children to develop psychologically and culturally.

### **The teaching of English to elementary schools In Indonesia**

It started in 1993 when the government issued the policy that English was allowed to be included in the elementary school curriculum as a local content curriculum. The policy states that the government started giving permission to elementary schools to introduce English as one of the school subject. It has been two decades since then I would like, however to put it as, “not prohibiting” English to be taught in the elementary level of the children’s education. The compulsory position, as we know it, is in the junior and senior high school levels. The position in the curriculums influences how the government treat it. English is also known as the local content subject which is not nationally tested and the curriculum of which is only provided for the fourth up to the sixth grade, from the first to the third, no national curriculum is available.

In early implementation of the policy, provinces which provided curricula which were locally made and were different from one another were DIY, East Java, West Java, Central Java and DKI. Some were theme based, others were topic based. They also varied in the approaches and methods proposed. here had not yet been a nationally developed curriculum for all elementary schools which was badly needed for the newly introduced subject. In the early years teachers and those involved in the English provision need some guideline from experts on the teaching of English to young learners.

The result of the teaching and learning has not been satisfactory nationally as shown by some research studies though it has been two decades. Looking at the teaching learning processes even makes us sad. Some of us seem even to lose hope that give it up and come to the decision that it is in vain to make our children learn English in the elementary schools. The cause is that the constraints seemingly to be too complicated to deal with. Ending the English provision in the elementary schools sounds right if the consideration is based on the equity of the basic educational service all over the country. We completely understand if the top priority in our educational scheme is still to give equal educational opportunity for all Indonesian children at the age of the elementary schools. The government does have a lot homework on this case. Therefore, thinking about problems and constraints in the provision of English to our elementary schoolchildren can wait. We simply say that it is a luxury to put time, fund and energy to seriously think about English in the elementary schools .

Now that English will not colour the school days of our children in the elementary schools, we can think about the situations that happen due to the policy. Therefore while our children are kept away from learning English in the elementary schools, the following things will be happening :

#### **The children have lost their right to learn other languages**

A new interpretation of the human right includes the right to learn languages whether they are first, second or even foreign ones. If our children are not given the right to learn the international language which is often called as a passport to the global world, it will be justifiable to simply say that our education system has taken away the right of the elementary children in learning a foreign language which as Brewster (2004) puts it : learning English early will make our children psychologically, linguistically, and culturally ready to be part of the global citizenship.

#### **Other children in other 144 countries learn English**

While our children are spending their school age in the elementary schools learning things except English, other elementary schoolchildren in 144 countries in the world are enjoying themselves learning the international language through most sophisticated ways. The British Council in collaboration with University of Aston (2011), reported the fact and those are from all the continents include English as a school subject in elementary schools. In Hungary, Poland and Spain Elementary schoolchildren as the representatives of European countries learn English in schools.

It would be more likely to compare our elementary schoolchildren with those in Asia. All countries in Asia, from Japan to India, children in elementary schools learn English. To be more specific, in the South East Asian countries, all countries offer English in the elementary level. Things of course are not similar from country to country; however. We only need the

information that children in other countries in the world learn English in the elementary schools so that we can also say why the Indonesian children cannot and do not do the same thing. If they are not introduced to English as early as their other fellow children in the world they will be left behind. They will not know English as well as other children in the world when they grow up.

### **The children are driven away from enjoying the luxurious easily accessed learning programs and materials**

The progress in the English teaching science and technology has provided today English learners with and amazing learning resources easily accessed by anyone interested. Children especially have now plenty of learning materials and programmes which are supported by the rapid progress of technology. If our children do not learn English formally they will not see the importance of serious learning. Moreover, the advantage of English learning will only be enjoyed by those children of the educated families who might provide English learning from the internet.

### **Elementary schoolchildren lose their opportunity to meet English**

Children learning time at school today tend to increase so that they spend more time at school than at home. Although they have longer school time, they have to wait for six years before meeting English in the junior high schools.

### **SMP teachers have to deal with children with no English background**

I had once an opportunity to meet some SMP English teachers who have known about the policy of the termination of the English provision in the elementary schools. They think that it is a setback that they have to introduce English to the students from the very beginning.

### **English teachers in the elementary schools lose their jobs**

Two decade implementation of the teaching of English in the elementary schools has attracted many people to take a job as English teachers in the elementary schools. Their educational background and training vary, from English education department with specialities in teaching children to no training whatsoever. The policy has given jobs to thousands of teachers. If we look at the number of elementary schools in our country which reaches the number of 26.578.317 (<http://nisn.jardiknas.org/cont/data.statistik/index.php>)

### **The termination of elementary English provision policy put many people out of business**

The huge number of elementary children is good for business. It has created jobs and business for textbook and material writers, booksellers, publishers etc. The school subjects mean business for many people. If English is no longer a school subject, those who have enjoyed it for so many years will have to turn to other business. This will not be good for our nation.

### **Conclusion**

It is certainly worthwhile to take up what Brewster (2004) has to say about the English teaching in the elementary schools. The aim of foreign language programmes should not only learning to use the language but developing sensitivity to and awareness of foreign languages and cultures. We also need to be aware that if we want to introduce English to our elementary schoolchildren, some requirements need to met. They are:

1. The policy should include an overall framework of the positions of the existing languages in the country. The decision of the policy should be made together with other languages.
2. It should be properly planned and lessons from other successful countries should be taken into account. Teachers, teacher educators, curriculum designers, materials writers and assessment specialists must understand the aims of the policy. They should be consulted from the start of the policy creation.
3. Government and private institutions must see that adequate resources are provided to ensure optimal condition. The policy should include also appropriately trained teacher educators and teachers, not only material resources, appropriate coursebooks and other classroom aids.

4. An evaluation of the learning outcome after a set of period needs to be conducted.

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