

AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS' BELIEF IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study was aimed at revealing teachers' beliefs about teaching English at the elementary school level, especially the beliefs concerned with (1) whether or not teaching English at the elementary level was necessary and (2) the possibility of using a monolingual approach (full English) in teaching English at the elementary level. This study used a qualitative method in which the researcher interviewed 40 English teachers who taught at elementary schools in Jabodetabek (Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, Bekasi). The results of this study showed that in general, there was a need to teach English starting from the first grade of elementary level. Respondents believed that the earlier students were introduced to English, the better the results would be, considering the fact that first-grade students were still inside the golden age period. However, in order not to burden students, teachers must pay attention to the students' abilities and characteristics. Moreover, respondents also believed that implementing monolingual (full-English) in classroom teachings was possible. To have successful monolingual teachings, it was recommended that classroom teachings resemble the process of first language acquisition. Furthermore, teachers should pay attention to the linguistic input they gave to students in such a way that it met the formulation of $i+1$. Finally, a fun learning atmosphere that is free from fear or stressful situation also played an important role in the successful implementation of this monolingual approach.

Keywords: English for Elementary School, teachers' belief, language acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the issues that have always been interesting throughout the history of teaching English as a foreign language is teaching English to young learners. Formulations and theories were investigated to improve the quality of teaching. Some of the interesting issues are whether or not English is necessary for children, the ideal time for children to begin learning English, and the possibility of using a monolingual approach (full-English) in classroom teachings. Some experts say that the use of full-English in classroom teachings is vital to support the process of acquiring a foreign language that actually resembles L1 acquisition (Ellis, 1986).

However, some researches reveal the opposite, namely the use of monolinguals in classroom teachings is not necessary considering that the students are elementary school children. Cook (2008), for example, argued that the process of L1 and foreign language acquisition was different and therefore could not be compared. In the process of acquiring L1, children have not mastered any languages yet, so there has been no interference from other languages. As for the process of acquiring a foreign language, children usually have mastered their L1 and this L1 is considered to be a foothold and assistance so that children can master

foreign language more easily. Considering these facts, there are opportunities for differences in the way teachers teach English. Some teachers may use monolinguals and others will be bilingual (combining English and the students' L1). In addition to the monolingual/bilingual approach, the right time to start teaching English to children is also often a concern. Some elementary schools start teaching English from grade 1, while some others delay until grade 4. However, from the point of view of experts, Lenneberg (1967) strongly recommended the best time to start teaching foreign languages to children was before puberty. This theory is widely known as the Critical Period Hypothesis. Thus, this theory strengthens the assumption that teaching English since grade 1 of elementary school is better.

The two examples above are some of the differences in the practice of teaching English at the elementary level. Therefore, this study intends to dig deeper into teachers' beliefs about the practice of teaching English to children (elementary school students), especially the beliefs concerned with (1) whether or not teaching English in elementary schools was necessary and (2) the possibility of using monolingual (full English) in teaching English at the elementary level.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies reveal different beliefs among teachers in teaching English to children. As stated by Caner et. al (2010), teachers tended to believe that the most ideal teaching was to pay attention to the extent of students' abilities and what students are interested in so that teachers can design appropriate activities. Similarly, in research conducted by Hawanti (2014),

teachers believed that the absence of an official syllabus from the government regarding teaching English to children posed a serious problem for the implementation of classroom instruction. The syllabus and the teaching practice are entirely left to the teacher and rely on the teacher's ability and belief. The problem is, teachers' abilities and beliefs have not been optimally formed. To deal with these problems, teachers use any textbooks without paying attention to techniques that can attract children. Furthermore, Damar et. al (2013), found that teachers believe English should be given to children as early as possible, since the first year of elementary school or even since pre-school. Teachers also believe that in teaching English to children, they must use techniques that are fun and related to children's physical wellbeing to train their cognitive, affective, and motoric intelligence. As for the use of monolingual in the classroom, Ellis (1986) revealed that the success of acquiring a second/target language was strongly influenced by interference from other languages. Therefore, teachers must use the full-English approach in the classroom and should not be interfered with by other languages such as the students' L1.

According to Freeman and Johnson (1998), teachers' pedagogical abilities were obtained not only when they participated in teacher education programs. These abilities are also the result of previous experiences, values, and beliefs held by the teachers. These are believed to be the basis for teachers in carrying out activities in the classroom. Fives and Gill (2015) have also summarized several points about teacher beliefs according to several experts. As stated by Freeman and Johnson (1998), teachers' beliefs tend to be their driving force in determining

classroom instructional activities. The beliefs they hold about the entire learning process; both the subject matter and students, are the teachers' determinants of every action that will be taken in the learning process. Teachers tend to consider things based on established values and beliefs about learning. Kagan (1992), states that the beliefs held by a teacher tend to be solid and not easily shaken. Furthermore, Johnson (1994) also mentioned that in the teaching and learning process, teachers' beliefs affected the way teachers delivered material to students. Therefore, it is very important to explore what teachers believe to improve their performance, especially in teaching English to children.

Teachers' beliefs specifically that involve whether or not it is necessary to teach English to children are important issues to explore. According to Garton et. al (2011), one of the reasons why children need to be taught English is because there are many assumptions that early age is the most ideal age for absorbing knowledge, in this context, linguistics. Damar et. al (2013) also mentioned that there were several advantages to teaching English at an early age. First, children could easily develop foreign language skills by relying on L1 acquisition processes. Second, children were "excellent imitators", they were likely to acquire English more easily. Moreover, children were less likely to have anxiety like adult students. Thus, the assumption "the earlier the better" strengthens the belief about the need to start teaching English to children because they learn better and get more satisfying learning outcomes. In addition, Garton et. al (2011) also explained the need to teach English to children was due to the high demand, including parental and the globalization

demand. The demand also leads to pressure on governments to ensure every human resource can speak English well. In addition, high school students have relatively low English proficiency. This is due to the lack of basic knowledge that should have been possessed by students since the elementary level, but has not yet been mastered even when they are in high school. Therefore, maximizing English teaching from an early age is believed to be necessary because it is expected to prepare students in high school (Zein, 2015).

About the problems mentioned earlier, it is clear that high school students' low English proficiency is caused by the absence of a strong base at the elementary level. Therefore, one possible solution to improve the situation is to provide English at an early age (Sadtono, 2007). However, based on the provisions that have been regulated by the government, English teaching is given to students as a local content subject and is started from grade 4 onwards provided that there are qualified teachers and facilities to accommodate effective instructional activities (Zein, 2016). As for other countries in this 21st century, foreign language learning policies for children are quite diverse. According to Tinsley and Comfort (2012), in several countries such as Finland, Croatia, France, Norway, Sweden, and Singapore, English teaching has been introduced since the age of 6 as a compulsory subject. Meanwhile, other countries such as Bulgaria, China, Greece, Korea, and Taiwan introduce English starting at the age of 8. Moreover, in the countries of Slovenia, Denmark, Hungary, Argentina, and Lithuania English is introduced at around the age of 9 (Damar, et al. 2013).

Regarding the use of English as the language of instruction in teaching and learning activities, Cook (2008) stated the use of English as the only language of instruction was an important thing. Teachers should maximize full-English and minimize the use of students' L1. Cook also said that during the 1990s, many countries such as Japan tended to use the TL (target language) and prohibit the use of students' L1 in the classroom. The use of full English in language classes has been supported by many researchers in the last quarter-century. By using full-English, children will get rich exposure to the TL and this is beneficial considering the fact that the language of instruction used in the classroom may be the only source of language input for some students. Moreover, teachers who apply full-English in the classroom enable students to learn the TL more naturally. Therefore, teachers must do more repetitions when pronouncing the TL to ensure students understood correct sentence structures and intonation (Bateman, 2008).

However, the fact shows there are still many teachers who do not apply the use of the TL in the classroom adequately. According to research conducted by Duff and Polio (1990), many teachers refused to use full-English and still used the students' L1 due to the students' limited English. These teachers used the students' L1 to teach grammar, regulate classroom conditions, and introduce new words (Bateman, 2008). A study conducted by Franklin (1990), found that as many as 201 teachers refused to use the target language for the same reasons, such as students' limited skill of the TL and teacher's low confidence to apply TL as the only language of instruction (Bateman, 2008). However, teachers must remember that children learn

differently from adults. Children tend to not understand why they need to learn a foreign language, and this causes their lack of motivation to use the TL. Therefore, teacher's role is very important to keep using full TL in various ways. Teachers' creativity in delivering material and implementing various activities that attract students' attention and that encourage students to use the TL is a must. One example is in the research conducted by Garcia (2007). During the classroom instruction, the teacher made activities and games that required students to use only the TL to participate. This way, students were more motivated to produce TL without feeling pressured in a fun and enjoyable situation.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research used a qualitative method as it examined and sought for phenomena experienced by research subjects (Creswell, 2007) and it revealed behavior, perceptions, motivations, and actions in a natural context (Moleong, 2017). An instrument in the form of an unstructured interview which included several questions was used. The instrument was focused on investigating teachers' beliefs about the need for teaching English in elementary schools and the possibility of using full-English in classroom teachings. The respondents were 40 English teachers who taught at elementary schools around Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi (Jabodetabek). Respondents have various teaching experiences, ranging from 2 up to 17 years. The research was conducted in 6 months from April to October 2021. To ensure the validity of the data, the researchers used data triangulation, namely observation, and documentation.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Need for Learning English at Elementary School Level

The first interview question answers the formulation of the first problem, whether or not teaching English at the elementary level was necessary. Of the 40 elementary school English teachers who were interviewed, there were two major different answers, namely necessary without any conditions and necessary under certain conditions. As many as 5 teachers answered it was necessary to teach English at the elementary level, yet under certain conditions. Meanwhile, the rest 35 people answered it was necessary without any conditions. Five people who answered necessary but under several conditions seemed to be influenced by the class level and the learning objectives at that level. They do not agree with English taught at the elementary level if the goal is focused on theoretical learning such as memorizing grammatical rules, but they agree if the goal is to practice communication skills or to introduce simple daily vocabulary. In addition, English should not be taught in grades 1, 2, 3 because students are still adapting to the 2013 Curriculum which may be burdensome for some students. However, English still has to be taught in grades 4, 5, 6 in preparation for high school levels (respondent #4, #6, #10, #38).

The other 35 respondents stated that learning English was needed from the elementary level without any requirements. The reasons can be grouped into four, namely: (1) because learning English in elementary school is the basis for learning at higher levels of education; (2) because learning English is the provision of students' lives in the future; (3) because this current era is the globalization era and English is

indispensable; and (4) because elementary school students are still in the golden age, therefore learning English will be more easily absorbed.

The first reason why learning English is needed from the elementary school level is because it serves as a basis for learning English at higher levels of education. A total of 14 respondents reveals the same thing. Several respondents also state clearly that students who had received English since elementary school would find it easier to understand materials at junior and senior high schools because they have learned the basics of English in elementary school. In addition, learning at the elementary level serves as an introduction so when they enter junior high school, they are more familiar with various English vocabulary and subject matter. On the other hand, students who do not receive sufficient English during elementary school tend to be more surprised and experience more difficulties in coping with the English materials in high schools (respondent #2, #2, #18, #20, #30, #40). Besides that, some respondents stated that learning English in elementary schools is important because it has been combined with PLBJ subjects (Pendidikan Lingkungan Budaya Jakarta), especially in elementary schools in Jakarta. In other words, combining English with PLBJ will indirectly reduce the portion of the English material itself which in turn will increase the number of English materials that have to be taught at high schools. Some materials should be introduced at the elementary level. Yet, due to the time constraints and to the combination of PLBJ subjects, the materials then can only be introduced at junior high school level (respondent #16). In addition, a respondent also conveyed his experience as an English

teacher at both elementary and high school levels. Based on his experience, students who were not introduced to English during elementary school tended to have very limited vocabularies which made it difficult for them to master certain materials in high schools (respondent #9). The next reason why English needs to be introduced since elementary school, according to some respondents, is as a provision for students' lives in the future where the world demand human resources who have a good command of English (respondent #31, #32, #35, #37). In this globalization era, English is needed to survive (respondent #5, #17, #36, #7, #21, #12). Several other respondents state another reason why learning English is needed from the elementary level. The reason is that elementary students are still classified as golden age students, therefore, any learning, including English, will likely be easier (respondent #14, #19, #27). In addition to the answers above about the golden age, there is also a respondent who relates it to L1 acquisition (respondent #24). This respondent states that learning English at an early age will give better results, just like acquiring a mother tongue which also occurs early in human life.

After examining the answers above, in general, the respondents feel the need to start teaching English from the elementary level. Some of the reasons are because learning English in elementary school serves as the basis and preparation for students to receive more English materials at higher levels of education. In addition, English is an international language that is used worldwide, therefore having a good command of English will be very helpful. Moreover, elementary students, especially grades 1, 2, 3 are still in the golden age where the brain's ability to

absorb information is believed to be at its best. Introducing English as early as possible is believed will give better results. The golden age itself is part of human psychological development. Age in this period is believed to be the best in terms of absorption of information. Some experts mention slight differences in the time span of the golden age, namely 0-2 years, 0-3 years, 0-5 years, or 0-8 years. Broadly speaking, everyone agrees that the golden period appears at the beginning of human life. At this period, the brain's ability to absorb information is so good that it has a strong impact on children's lives in the future (Prasetiawan, 2019). Then, it is very natural if some respondents associate it with learning English. The earlier English is introduced to students, the better the result will be because elementary students, especially grade 1, 2, 3 are still in their golden age.

Referring to the legal basis, the Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture of Indonesia, No. 060/U/1993, dated February 25, 1993, declared policies concerning the possibility of an English language program being introduced earlier in elementary schools as a local content subject. The government recommends that this subject be started at the 4th grade level of elementary school (Suyanto, 2010). In other words, at elementary schools, English is introduced as a local content subject, not as compulsory content. The English teaching as a local content subject is also adjusted to the readiness of each region/local/school. If the school is ready, then the subject can be introduced starting from grade 4 or even earlier such as from kindergarten. Yet, if the school is not ready, for example, due to limited human resources and facilities, then the subject may be included as extracurricular activities. This means that English is not omitted

from the curriculum as stated by respondent #9 and #28. Yet, since it serves as a local content subject, it is very natural if it does not always appear in the school curriculum.

The answers of the respondents above are by what has been stated by previous studies (Zein, 2015; Garton et.al, 2011; Damar et.al, 2013; Sadtono, 2007). In addition, according to respondents, in order not to burden students, learning English in elementary school levels should be filled with the introduction of simple daily vocabulary and conversations and avoid learning theories such as memorizing grammatical rules.

4.2 The Possibility of Using Monolingual Approach for Elementary Levels

The monolingual approach is the use of full-English without being interfered by the students' L1 during classroom instruction. Answering this research problem, the respondents can be grouped into two, namely the group who answers it is impossible and the group who answers it is possible to use the monolingual approach yet under certain conditions. As many as 16 respondents answered that the use of monolingual in the classroom is not yet possible to apply. The reasons are: (1) many students are still confused by and not used to the use of full-English; (2) there are still many students who do not fully understand English so they tend to remain silent, do not respond to the teacher, or look bored; (3) learning becomes less effective; (5) it increases possibilities for miscommunication; (6) students' environmental factors, for example at home, are not accustomed to using English; (7) learning objectives are not achieved; (8) there is fear that learning will be less fun; (9) students come from low socioeconomic groups;

(10) English learning is combined with PLBJ subjects, not all of which can be translated into English; and (11) full-English can only be used for the application of classroom language.

Meanwhile, as many as 24 other respondents answered that monolingual might be applied in the classroom for elementary school level yet with several notes. The first thing to note is that the implementation of monolingual can only be done in higher classes, namely grades 4, 5, 6. Meanwhile, in grades 1, 2, 3, it is considered not applicable because students' competence in English is still relatively limited (respondent #1, #18, #22, #26, #33). The second thing to note is that the implementation of monolingual is influenced by the type of school. High-qualified private schools, such as international schools that use Cambridge or British curricula, will certainly find it easy to implement monolingual in the classroom because the students usually come from an environment that is already accustomed to speaking English. However, for public schools, especially the regular ones whose students come from quite a heterogeneous environment and do not always pay attention to education, it will be difficult to implement monolingual (respondents #6, #23). The third thing that must be considered according to respondents is that the application of full-English at the elementary level should be done by combining English with the students' mother tongue (bilingual). With this bilingual approach, the teacher continues to use English but is accompanied by a translation into students' L1 every time he finishes speaking in English or whenever the students do not understand his words. This is done because, according to the respondents, students' abilities in

English, especially students in regular schools, are very diverse. They come from various socio-economic backgrounds. Not all students live in families or communities that have a high awareness of education. Some students live on the outskirts of the railroad tracks, while some others live in nice housing complexes. This makes it difficult for teachers to apply full-English and they still have to translate their English into the students' L1. If the teacher does not translate his English, it is likely that the students do not understand anything (respondents #8, #12, #15, #17, #19, #20, #24, #28, #29, #32, #39). In addition, the fourth thing that must be considered is that the application of monolingual full-English must be accompanied by Total Physical Response (TPR) and gestures to help students understand the teacher's intentions. Through TPR, the teacher demonstrates some words, usually verbs, through actions so that students catch the meaning of the word easily. Likewise, with gestures, all of the teacher's words should immediately be followed by demonstrations so students will easily understand the teacher's messages (respondents #4, #14). The last thing that must be considered according to the respondents is that the success of implementing monolingual at the elementary level is also determined by the support from the school management. The school management can create programs that support monolingualism, such as holding English Days. In English Days, all school members, including teachers, students, employees, and other school members must communicate only in English. Another school program that can also support monolingualism is language selection, where at the time of admission, students will be tested for their English skills to determine their

level of mastery. If the average level of mastery is good, then a full-English monolingual can be applied (respondents #10, #13, #38).

The answers of the respondents, both stating possibilities and impossibilities to implement monolingualism at the elementary school level, were relevant to the results of the previous study. Ellis (1986) says that full-English in the classroom is something that is very much needed to support the process of acquiring a foreign language which actually resembles first language acquisition. Cook (2008) also stated that maximizing the use of English in the classroom was an important thing for every teacher to do. Teachers should implement full-English learning in the classroom and minimize the use of students' mother tongue. By implementing full-English in the classroom, students can get optimal input, considering that learning activities in the classroom may be the only source of linguistic input that is most effective for some students. Furthermore, teachers who apply full-English in the classroom and pay attention to the quantity and quality of their English, including the ones concerned with English pronunciation, accuracy, and intonation, will enable students to learn the target language more naturally. On the other hand, in other studies, there are still many teachers who refuse to use full-English and still use the students' mother tongue due to the students' limited English skills and the teachers' low confidence in using the TL in the classroom (Bateman, 2008). In addition, the rejection of full-English also occurs because of the assumption that the process of first and foreign language acquisition is different and therefore cannot be compared. In the process of

acquiring L1, a child has not mastered any languages so there is no interference from other languages. As for the process of acquiring a foreign language, children usually have mastered their mother tongue and this mother tongue is considered capable of being a foothold and assistance so that children can master the foreign language more easily (Cook, 2008).

In the study of SLA, the term language acquisition is defined as the process taken by a child both in mastering his mother tongue and his second language. The process of language acquisition is filled with meaningful and natural interactions in the target language, takes place subconsciously (naturally and subconsciously), and usually uses spoken language. The focus is not the grammar used but the meaning, message, and intention of the speaker. In this case, the speaker can make various modifications to facilitate understanding and errors in grammatical rules are not focused on (Krashen, 1981; Palmer in Harmer, 2007). In addition, the theory of Input Hypothesis is also widely known. This theory argues that successful language acquisition/learning is highly influenced by the nature of language input that the students receive. The language input is formulated as $i + 1$, which means: input is the students' current knowledge + the information which is slightly above it. In other words, the linguistic input given to students must be understandable, only slightly above the student's current language competence, interesting and relevant, given in sufficient quantity, and delivered in a friendly atmosphere (low-anxiety context). In addition, this input must also be roughly-tuned and not pay too much attention to linguistic rules as what happens in L1 acquisition. This

roughly-tuned input will help the acquisition process runs better (Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Harmer, 2007).

Relating the previous studies, the respondents' answers, the language acquisition theory, and the Input Hypothesis, it can be concluded that the implementation of monolingual (full-English in classroom teachings) for the elementary level is still possible as long as: (1) teachers pay attention to the language acquisition process that occurs in the classroom; and (2) teachers pay attention to the linguistic input given to students. These two things are very important and the teachers' inability to present these will lead to students' inability to understand the teacher's speech which eventually will make both the teacher and students give up.

Here is the explanation. First, the teacher must pay attention to the language acquisition process that occurs in the classroom. This means that the teacher, as much as possible, brings all of the characteristics of L1 acquisition into the learning process in the classroom. In other words, the teacher must consistently use English, not be tempted to use the students' L1, prioritizes spoken language first, uses natural conversations that occur through daily experience, and use gestures, facial expressions, movements, etc. to facilitate meaning. This consistency is important considering that acquisition will occur if students have received sufficient linguistic input in terms of quantity and quality. This process resembles that of a mother when communicating with her child. Of course, a newborn baby will not immediately understand his mother's words. But over time, with consistency and effort, it will eventually be able to understand its mother tongue naturally.

Second, to make sure that the implementation of full-English runs well, then in addition to paying attention to the language acquisition process that occurs in the classroom, teachers must also pay attention to the linguistic input that is given to the students. The level of English difficulty used by the teacher in the classroom must meet the $i+1$ formula, which is only 1 level above the students' current language ability. If the students are real beginners, the teacher must also be able to adjust the language input, for example by not using sentences that have a standardized structure. Instead, the teacher can use broken English in which sentences are spoken as fragments of words but still have meaning. If the teacher forces himself to use standardized English, students will likely be confused, not understand, and eventually give up. In addition to using broken English, the teacher must also accompany his language input with body language, facial expressions, movements, etc. which can make it easier for students to understand the teacher's intentions. The teacher must also be able to create a pleasant learning atmosphere, free from fear/stress/anxiety, just like when a mother talks to her child. Of course, students will not necessarily master English in one lesson. Just as L1 acquisition requires process and time until a child can finally understand his mother tongue, so does the acquisition of English. After getting sufficient and consistent linguistic input, students still need some time to be competent in English. This is the time when teachers display patience and are more process-oriented rather than result-oriented.

5. CONCLUSION

After reviewing the findings and discussions, it can be concluded that in

general, the respondents feel the need to introduce English starting from the elementary school level. Most respondents believe that the earlier students are introduced to English, the better the results will be considering that the 1st-grade elementary students are still in the golden age range. However, in order not to burden students, introducing English at this level, teachers must pay attention to the students' abilities and characteristics. In addition, most respondents also believe that the implementation of monolingual (full-English) in the classroom for the elementary level is still possible. The answers of the respondents are generally in line with previous studies. To make sure the implementation of monolingual successful, teachers must pay attention to the language acquisition process that occurs in the classroom and try to make the process consistent with the L1 acquisition. Furthermore, teachers must also pay attention to the linguistic input that the students receive and make sure that the input can meet the $i+1$ formulation. Finally, a pleasant learning atmosphere, free from anxiety is one of the keys to a successful implementation of monolingual at the elementary level.

Although this research reveals quite a lot of things related to teachers' beliefs about teaching English at the elementary level, there are still things that need to be improved, one of which is the reach of respondents. It is recommended that further research be conducted with a wider range of respondents, not only around Jabodetabek. In addition, it is also recommended that further research be carried out regarding what underlies the teachers' beliefs, whether their educational background, their personal experiences, the influence of school authorities, etc. And lastly, it is also

recommended to conduct further research on how the teachers implement instructional teachings which are in line with their beliefs so that the advantages and disadvantages that occur in the classroom can be revealed.

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