

A National Strategy in Achieving English Communicative Ability: Globalization Perspectives

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Abstract: The vital role of English as an instrument to speed up national development justifies substantial efforts to improve the instruction. Learners of English in Indonesia suffer from difficulties since the language environment does not support them. Compensating the lack of environmental supports with good quality of English instruction in the primary and secondary schools would need a huge budget that the Government could not afford. Therefore, the target of the efforts should be limited to a smaller but more prospective population: university students.

Key words: English teaching, strategy, globalization, communicative ability.

In a paper that I wrote recently (Huda, 1997) I attempt to show that a factor that has given a significant impact on the failure of English instruction in Indonesia is the overall plan of national system of English instruction. We do not have yet a unified national system of English education in Indonesia. The teaching of English in the lower and upper secondary schools retains the feature of the old system of education, and it does not reflect the current system of education. English instruction in the primary school seems to be a separate part of the national system

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of English education, and the teaching at the university level in many cases is outside the whole system.

In this article I intend to show that the lack of coherence in the national system of English instruction reflects the complex problem that the Government has to face in the basic and secondary education and suggest an alternative to solve it. Considering that English has a vital role in speeding up the pace of national development, a more rational and proportional strategy in the improvement of English communicative ability needs to be drawn up.

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH

As early as 1950 when a choice had to be made concerning a foreign language to be included in the school curriculum nation wide (either Dutch or English), policy makers were aware of the important role of English as a tool in the development of Indonesia. The choice fell on English, and not Dutch, even though the Dutch had colonialized Indonesia for three and a half centuries. The government policy is reflected in the 1967 decree of the Minister of Education and Culture concerning the function of English instruction in secondary schools, that is, 'to speed up national development' in addition to establish relationship with other nations and to carry out national foreign policy.

The teaching of English in secondary schools was intended to prepare the students to continue their education at the university level. The aim of teaching was to equip students with 'working knowledge of English' in order that they can read textbooks and follow lectures given by foreign lecturers. The underlying background of the policy was that the Indonesian language could not yet serve for academic purposes. Today, thirty years afterwards, the need for knowledge of English is even greater although the Indonesian language has functioned as a medium of instruction at all levels of education.

The world is changing very rapidly towards a global village. No country today can grow in isolation. Advancement in information, transportation, and production technology has led to a global market place for goods and services. The implementation of the free market agreement in 2003 in the ASEAN region and in 2018 in the Asia Pacific region will lead countries in the region into a stringent competition. Only nations with high quality of manpower succeed in international competition.

Thus human resource development becomes a central issue in developing countries such as Indonesia. The main challenge is to develop a system of education and training in order to build high quality manpower which is able to compete at international level. It is obvious that an important quality necessitated to such manpower is an ability to communicate internationally in addition to the skills and knowledge prerequisites by respective fields or jobs. With that ability it is expected that the transfer of knowledge and technology can take place more rapidly and, hopefully we will not become a nation that is always a few years behind in scientific and technological advancement (Dardjowidjojo, 1997). The ability to communicate internationally today is clearly ability to communicate in English.

NEED FOR ENGLISH IN INDONESIA

There has been a significant change in the real needs for English in Indonesia for the last 30 years. The need for English in the fifties and sixties is expressed in the 1967 Ministerial decree. The decree states that the aim of English teaching is to equip the students with working knowledge of English. The specific language skills to be mastered by students are (1) effective reading ability, (2) ability to understand spoken English, (3) writing ability, and (4) speaking ability. Thus the order of language skills are reading, listening, writing, and speaking.

The objective of English language teaching was determined on the basis of students' need for English: (1) they can read textbooks and reference materials written in English which constitute 90% of the total existing reference; (2) to follow lectures delivered by foreign lecturers as part of collaboration with universities abroad or to communicate individually with foreigners; (3) to make notes of lectures given by foreign lecturers and to introduce Indonesian culture to other nations; and (4) to communicate with foreign lecturers and fellow students orally.

Thus the need for English ability in the fifties and sixties is limited to academic purposes at the university level, that is, English as a tool to interact with foreign lecturers, students, and to read textbooks and reference materials.

Today a broader need for English language skills may be identified. In this era of globalization, individuals need English in order to communicate with others at international forums. Communication may be

conducted orally or in writing depending on the types of job and the need for communication. To university students English is needed in order to be able to read textbooks and reference materials which remain substantial parts. But university students are not required to be able to speak in English.

On the contrary university graduates (in addition to many non-university graduates), due to the nature of their jobs, are required to be able to speak as well as to read and write in English. Those who have contacts with foreigners, such as jobs at airports, banks, travel agents, and companies, need to have English speaking ability.

THE THEORY

Language Acquisition

Researchers have identified a number of variables affecting success in second language acquisition. Yorio (1976) has identified a host of learner variables which she classifies into 6 groups: age, cognition, native language, input, affective domain, and educational background. Of these variables, input seems to have received a great attention in studies of language acquisition. Yorio further classifies input into two kinds: context of learning and context of teaching. Context of learning provides learners with natural input from interaction in community and context of teaching is a situation in which learners receive input from instruction. Context of learning is known as language exposure, and context of teaching generally known as instruction. The extent to which language exposure and instruction exert effects on language acquisition has become one of central issues in studies of second language acquisition. Ellis (1986) compares the results of 12 studies of second language acquisition mostly conducted in second language environment; only one study was conducted in a foreign language environment. Out of 12 studies, 6 studies suggest that formal instruction does not help, and 3 studies show that both formal instruction and exposure help. In one study exposure helps the most and in another study instruction helps the most. He comes to a conclusion that 'instruction aids the rate/success of second language acquisition'; however, as observed from the data in the second language environment exposure seems to be the main source of success in second language acquisition.

The reason that language exposure serves as a main factor in the success of second language acquisition has been explained in a number of theories under one broad topic 'monitor theory' (e.g., Krashen, 1981, 1985; Bialystok, 1978; Stevick, 1980). This theory posits that the linguistic knowledge that a learner obtains from direct exposure in the target language plays a major role in the production of the second language; and that the linguistic knowledge that one gets from learning (self learning or formal instruction) has a secondary role. This theory evidently explains why learners who luckily live in a second language environment and in a bilingual environment have a host of advantages over their fellow learners who 'unluckily' live in a foreign language environment. Those who live in second and bilingual language environments have more opportunities to achieve better than those who are living in a foreign language environment.

This theory also explains why people learn English in countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, China, and Japan are put at a disadvantaged situation than those living in Singapore, India, Malaysia, and the Philippines. In the former countries learners live in a foreign language environment which lacks of natural language exposure, and in the latter, on the other hand, they have more opportunities for language exposure. In these countries they learn English in a second language environment, and for a significant number of learners, in a bilingual language environment. The difference of language learning opportunities in the two groups of countries related to the learning of English, is not only shown in the availability of natural exposure in the community, but also in classroom practices (Dardjowidjojo, 1996). In countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, English is not only taught as a subject, but also is given a status as a medium of instruction from the primary school up to the university.

Instruction

This theory also suggests indirectly that if learners in a foreign language environment such as learning English in Indonesia, Thailand, and China have to achieve English competency to the level that their fellow learners have in a second/bilingual language environment, the efforts that the learners have to make (individually or as part of formal

instruction) should compensate for the opportunities that their fellow learners have in a second language environment. In other words, teaching and self efforts should be made in a way that learners can get as much exposure as their fellow learners in a second language environment. In practice the major parts of the efforts are made in formal instruction.

Dunkin and Biddle (1974) mention three variables that affect success of instruction: presage, context, and process variables. The presage variables deal with the teacher: formative experiences, training experiences, and properties. The context variables include the student, the school and community, and the classroom. The process variables include teacher and pupil behavior in the classroom. All of these variables have relevance to the success of English instruction in Indonesia, especially teachers competence in English language teaching, teacher motivation, student motivation and learning facilities in the family, and classroom size and facilities.

PROBLEMS OF ENGLISH INSTRUCTION

The theories outlined above suggest that two major variables affect the success of second language acquisition. The first major variable is language exposure in natural communication which requires active interaction on the part of the learner. In the context of English acquisition in Indonesia and the neighboring countries, language exposure may be represented by the language environment and national language policy of the respective countries (cf. Dardjowidjojo, 1996). The second major variable is formal instruction, particularly English language instruction at school. Within this variable, three variables play a significant role: student, teacher, and school.

Comparison of English instruction in second language environments (Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines) with that in a foreign language environment (i.e., Indonesia) reveals that English learners in the former countries are substantially facilitated by the environment and the bilingual language policy in the classroom, which their fellow learners in Indonesia are not. Thus if we want students of English in Indonesia achieve a comparable competency in English as their fellow students in the neighboring countries (Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines), other vari-

ables in the instruction should score superior. In the following we will look at major problems of classroom practices in Indonesia.

Teaching Objective

When English was adopted as a first foreign language to be taught in secondary schools in Indonesia, policy makers set a high expectation. English in secondary schools was intended to prepare students to enter university education. The main objective of the instruction, as stated in the 1967 Ministerial decree, was reading ability. Graduates of senior secondary schools were expected to be able to read textbooks written in English. In addition, they were expected to be able to follow lectures in English given by foreign lecturers. Realizing that this expectation was still too high, in subsequent years, policy makers decided that reading ability was a first priority. In the 1980's a growing trend arose that reading ability only was not enough; secondary school students wanted to acquire an oral communicative command in English. This trend was shown clearly in the result of a national survey conducted in late 1980s. The majority of students, parents, and teachers expected that in addition to reading ability, senior secondary school graduates should have acquired speaking ability in English (Huda, 1990).

English in the Primary School

When the 1994 national curriculum was being developed, a strategy was drawn up to develop speaking ability. An alternative was to include speaking ability in the objective of English teaching in senior secondary schools. It was certainly a difficult decision. Inclusion of speaking ability in the national curriculum would mean that the government should provide more qualified teachers of English, suitable facilities for classroom practice, and a system of examination to measure speaking ability nation wide. This certainly needs a large sum of budget.

Another alternative was to start English teaching in the primary school. Starting foreign language lesson at a young age would have psychological advantages. Young learners tend to pick up a language easily, especially as far as oral ability is concerned. Research has shown

that individuals learning a language at a young age can achieve near native pronunciation.

However, some reject the idea of starting English in the Primary School. Most people object to it for reason of nationalism. Some worry that starting a foreign language lesson early would give a negative effect on the development of Indonesian language. Another objection deals with logistic issues. Teaching English in the Primary School would certainly require the government to provide with more and more English teachers and facilities. This is undoubtedly a big burden for the administration.

A solution to the problem that temporarily looks good is giving a status of local content to English lesson in the curriculum of the Primary School. But this decision has led to other problems: unavailability of enough teachers, material, and confusion of the function of English lesson (see Huda, 1994 and 1997).

Method of Teaching

When people began to realize that those who used English were mostly young people who wanted to continue their education to university, they shifted the focus of instruction from oral-aural ability to reading ability. The problem is to determine a method of teaching to achieve reading skill. In the 1970s when the oral approach was in its heyday, people believed that learning a foreign language should go along this order: listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Thus there is no formula to develop reading skill without going through listening and speaking skills.

A similar issue arose when English language teaching adopted a communicative approach. Communicative approach has been understood as an approach to develop communicative ability. Communication involves oral-aural ability, and for this reason in the 1980s some people believe that the teaching of English in secondary school should be directed to the development of oral-aural skill. To avoid this misunderstanding, the communicative approach in the 1994 English curriculum was given a new label 'meaningful approach' (Huda, 1995). This phenomenon has shown us that foreign language ability is a complex skill.

Attempting to master a specific skill cannot be successful without mastering other skills which obviously require a lot of time and efforts.

Logistic Problems

The preceding discussion suggests that foreign language learning is a difficult task. Attempting to master a specific skill cannot be done without developing other language skills. Therefore, learning a foreign language such as English requires a lot of time and efforts. Thus if we want students in secondary schools to achieve English proficiency comparable to their fellow students in countries where English functions as a second language, it is indeed a gigantic task.

One prime requirement to meet this challenge is that classroom activities should give maximum opportunities to students to acquire the language. Classroom interaction should be of first quality. This needs English teachers who have very good command of English. On the contrary, the statistical facts of English teachers in secondary school are gloomy. Huda (1990) reported results of a national survey that 37% of secondary school English teachers were senior secondary school graduates with no training in TEFL. An earlier survey reported that in 1982 93.3% of junior secondary school teachers had only PGSLP diploma, and in the senior secondary schools 7.1% were B-satu graduates and 44.1% were teachers with bachelors degrees in English (Dardjowidjojo, 1997). Teacher's competence is also gloomy. In Huda's survey (1990), the teachers rated their own English competence and stated that 54.2% of English teachers had fair English competence, 38.2% stated good, and 7.5% stated poor. Hamied (1997) reported that student's performance was overall very low and he found positive significant correlations between teaching-learning activities and teachers' competence.

Another issue affecting quality of teaching-learning activities in foreign language classes is class size. Under the present standard class size of 40 students in the Primary and Secondary Schools, English classes are not effective. Individual students have only minimal contacts with their teachers and with their classmates to practice the language.

Other issues related to problems in secondary school education are textbooks, libraries, teaching aids, and teacher's salaries. All of these are not 'trivial' matters (cf. Dardjowidjojo, 1997), but indeed gigantic

national problems. Reducing a class size from 40 students to an ideal class of 20 students, for example, would mean to double the number of classrooms nationally. A similar calculation can be applied to the addition of teachers, increase in teacher's salaries, and other issues. At present the Ministry of Education and Culture are facing a gigantic national mission, i.e. implementing the nine year compulsory basic education program. The highest priority of the budget goes to this program.

SOLUTION

The role of English in international competition in the framework of the implementation of the APEC agreement is not questionable. The main and crucial issue is how to prepare a manpower which are competent in their respective fields and are able to communicate internationally. In other words, the crucial issue is to choose a strategy to prepare high quality manpower which is able to communicate in English. Under limitations of budget, it seems that we can put our budget to the whole population. But we have to make a choice of groups to be pushed to learn English.

Educational data in 1993 show that there are 25,564,582 primary school pupils, 4,067,500 junior secondary school students, 1,879,289 senior secondary school students, and 543,200 higher education students in public institutions (Minister of Education and Culture, 1993). Based on the data, the best choice is university students for at least two reasons: university graduates are prospective candidates of manpower who will have contacts at international level, and the number of the members is the smallest among the levels of education.

Under this strategy, English instruction in Primary and Secondary Schools is maintained as it is and the teaching of English at university level is pushed to the extent that the majority of the graduates will be able to communicate in English. Two important features of an effective strategy at university level are setting a requirement of a minimum level of English competency for university graduates and provision of an intensive course. Under the requirement of minimum English competency, a student may be granted a diploma if he/she has met the requirement. To help them improve their English proficiency, the university should provide intensive courses to students who have completed all academic requirements for a degree.

CONCLUSION

Since the time when it was first adopted as a first foreign language in the school curriculum, English language has served as an important tool to speed up national development. In the present era of globalization, its place has become more and more important especially in the international competition. However, efforts to provide good quality of English instruction in the secondary and primary schools have never come to a success. For reason of a smaller size of population and a more prospective position in the structure of manpower, focusing major efforts of improvement at the university level is well justified.

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