



## **PREPARING AND MOTIVATING SEVENTH GRADERS OF INDONESIAN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TO LEARN ENGLISH THROUGH A PRE-VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION PROGRAM**

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**Abstract:** *Indonesia curriculum has delayed English subject introduction until at least the student completes their primary level (aged 12). Starting English class with minimum vocabularies, the student is confronted to learn from authentic texts full of words they know not the meaning, nor the way to pronounce it right. The aim of the article is to discuss the motivational problem faced by the Indonesian Junior High School students as the beginners of English learners, particularly regarding their basic knowledge of English words that is important to help them feeling confident and positive during the first years of learning. The article proposes that some pre-vocabulary lessons should be given to students before or along the first year in Junior High School level.*

**Keywords :** *EFL-learners, vocabulary-instruction, curriculum.*

**Abstrak:** Kurikulum di Indonesia menunda pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sampai anak-anak menyelesaikan sekolah dasar (umur 12 tahun). Anak-anak ini harus memulai pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris mereka dengan jumlah kosakata yang minim, dan harus menghadapi model pembelajaran yang menggunakan bahan ajar teks yang otentik. Teks-teks bahasa Inggris ini penuh dengan kata-kata yang tidak mereka pahami maknanya dan mereka tak ketahui bagaimana pelafalannya. Tujuan penulisan artikel ini adalah untuk mendiskusikan masalah motivasi yang dihadapi oleh siswa sekolah menengah pertama sebagai pembelajar pemula bahasa Inggris. Pembahasan akan meliputi kosakata dasar mereka dalam Bahasa Inggris yang fungsinya sangat penting dalam menumbuhkan kepercayaan diri mereka dan sikap positif mereka terhadap pembelajaran bahasa Inggris dalam tahun-tahun awal di sekolah menengah pertama. Artikel ini merekomendasikan pembelajaran kosakata sebelum atau beriringan dengan pembelajaran awal Bahasa Inggris.

**Kata kunci :** *Pembelajar-EFL, Pengajaran-Kosakata, kurikulum*

English in Indonesia curriculum is not started until grade 7. After the subject was firstly enacted as a compulsory foreign language subject included in Indonesian formal education during Soeharto era in 1975, the increasing globalisation of English

language around the world inspired the Ministry of Education and Culture to issue a recommendation SK 060/U/1993 that permits English to be taught as a primary school local content started from grade 4, 5 and 6 in year of 1993. In 2006, a new curriculum

'strengthened' the English subject status in primary schools, from only a local alternative content, to become a local compulsory content (Baedhowi, 2016). Unfortunately, this policy did not come with enough supports from the government. Schools independently responded to the policy by started giving the subject to lower grades, selling textbooks, and appointing any teacher believed to have adequate English knowledge to be the teacher. As the subject then was only a local content, the human resource or teachers were pointed by the school themselves, not placed or sent by the government from the Educational Department. As the consequence, many schools used non-English qualified teachers to teach English. This practice happened for years, until 2013, or during Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's era, when for the first time English subject teaching was officially excluded from the primary school curriculum (Kurniasih & Sani, 2014). There were two reasons proposed by the ministry of education at the time regarding the restriction; 1) to protect the children from cognitive burden of learning a foreign language too early, 2) to preserve the national language of Indonesia (Afifah, 2012).

As primary school children were taught English by disqualified teachers who did not possess a formal English education qualification, the teaching process was afraid to go wrong and eventually confused or demotivated students to learn English. In addition, the government thought it was important for the Indonesian children to fully acquire their first language first before they learn another language, so as the national language is protected from foreign-language mixed codes

(Afifah, 2012), as what had happened to the Malaysian Malay dialect (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). Theoretically, the government assumed that, children would acquire an additional language best once they have learnt their first language relatively completely. In other words, English learning in Indonesian language and educational policy is aimed to be done in a formal instructional mode that requires the student to control their learning more independently, not in a way they learnt their first language, which was done more naturally and subconsciously.

The present article aimed to discuss the motivational problems faced by most Indonesian seventh graders or Junior High School starters in terms of learning English from classroom context and a pre-vocabulary-instruction to overcome the issue.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Are Indonesian Students Motivated?**

Lamb (2007) stated that junior high school students were highly motivated to learn English despite their limited achievement in the language learning. The study that conducted in Jambi through observation, interview and questionnaire as the tools of data collection explained that students' motivation to learn English is sustained as a long-term goal, but for daily basis, their motivation was not stable. One of the most important reasons for this fluctuated motivation is their experiences with the lessons which they described as often too teacher-directed and text-book based (Lamb, p. 771).

Another study by Yulia (2013) on junior high

school students regarding their motivation in learning English also confirmed Lamb's findings. From a questionnaire filled by 363 students from twelve schools in Jogjakarta, it was found that most students agreed to terms of 'I like learning English', 'English is my favourite subject', 'I need English for my future life', 'I need English for my further study' and 'my parents like me learning English'. However, from the classroom observation, it was found that the teaching and learning were dominated in Indonesian low variety language, not English. Yulia assumed that the English teachers in Indonesia, in general, failed to respond to this enthusiasm as they did not model the language enough to the students, thus diminished the students' positive attitude towards the subject.

From the government or curriculum perspective, the set-up of Junior High Schools as the onset of English learning is ideal, because theoretically at the time the child finishes their primary level, they normally have been ready cognitively to grasp the concept of language in general (Harmer, 2007) thus ready to install English as another language system into their brain. Practically, although the students are indeed cognitively ready, they still found the learning burdening despite their awareness about the importance of learning for their future. Lamb (2004) reported that successful young English learners in Indonesia were mostly the products of using the language communicatively in non-school contexts, such as parent-supported home, English-enthusiast peers and English course context. Or in other words, the success of the English learning in Indonesian EFL context depends on the student's immediate circle, not school classroom as their

main resource of learning.

From two studies above, it can be concluded that in terms of motivation, Indonesian junior high school students, in general, have extrinsic motivation to learn English but fail to maintain this motivation in their daily classroom basis due to the frustrating learning environment.

If only highly-motivated students can success the learning, one can assume that English, as a language, is not easy to learn. This for some reasons is true. The language has a more complex systems words (M. Adams, 2003; V. Adams, 2014). For one who comes from a simple, syllable-salient language like Indonesian, English is a truly foreign set of language rules. And the Indonesian English-learners, conditioned by the communicative-language-teaching (CLT) curriculum, have to start the learning, not by noticing the language use and forms first, but right away using it through task-based activities in the textbooks. Not to mention they are guided to do the tasks by a teacher who often is not competent enough in using the language communicatively, and many still apply a more teacher-directed method in managing the class (Lamb, 2007a). With these circumstances, communicative language teaching principles might not always work for Indonesian EFL conditions (Bekele, 2014; Koosha & Yakhabi, 2012). As the consequence, English teaching and learning fail to achieve the curriculum target (Fadilah, 2018; Lamb, 2007b).

Government has been trying to improve the condition by targeting the teachers, giving them more training to get their competency increased and to reward those who can prove their competency in teaching the subject (Renandya, Hamied, &

Nurkamto, 2018). Although the goal is promising, the result will not happen overnight. As teachers are increasing their competencies to match the curriculum demand, the students cannot wait, and should too start to prepare so they can learn the competencies listed in the curriculum. In other words, the teacher can start by teaching things the students are ready to learn, e.g. basic vocabularies, and students can start learning things teachers able to teach, e.g. basic vocabularies. This does not mean current English teaching and learning in Indonesian high-schools neglect the vocabulary aspect. Among many methods of vocabulary instructions, Indonesian junior high school students require one that can accommodate their zero-knowledge of English, their future demand to be an independent English learner and their typical EFL learner's classroom-anxiety. An appropriate pre-vocabulary instruction that includes not only meaning but also English language pronunciation and spelling peculiarities can be a promising solution.

### **Why Pre-Vocabulary Program Important?**

Phonologically, English and Indonesian are very different. English is more complex with heavy onsets and codas (Dixon, Chuang, & Quiroz, 2012; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005), more variants of vowels and diphthongs (Irnanda, 2019), that hard to distinguish one another. Many Indonesians start their English learning in Junior High School by being asked to read aloud texts they know not the meaning and are unsure the pronunciation. They are aware only about the fact that the English alphabet does not follow Indonesian alphabetical rules. Their first encounter with English classroom in Junior

High School is predictably full of nervousness and confusion, except the student has gained some knowledge in English, perhaps from parents, a friend(s), multi-media as explained by Lamb (2007). Given the grade 7<sup>th</sup> students already have certain knowledge in English, perhaps basic vocabularies, they might be more confident and positive towards the school-English as explained by Lamb (2004, 2007) as the minority who successfully maintain their motivation. Vocabularies, along with its pronunciation knowledge are not enough for communication, but at least, it gives one security, and optimism to get involved in classroom activities, like reading aloud texts.

As texts introduce interesting content and at the same time is a linguistic resource from which students can extract lexical items (Lewis, 2001, p. 47), Indonesian English school textbooks decided to make texts as the centre of learning. Theoretically, authentic language indeed promotes learning in a way that it gives models of how words or lexicon, as a single unit is used in real life (Lewis, 2001), but it also posits problems if the scaffolding principles neglected, and the highlight of the language chunks is not accompanied with drills. Or as Thornburry (1998) described in Harmer (2007, p. 75) as 'all chunks, but no pineapple'. Indonesian Junior High School students are asked to read texts that are too difficult to digest due to a relatively high number of unknown words.

A study by Baran Lucarz (Baran-Łuczarska, 2014) found a strong correlation between pronunciation anxiety and willingness to communicate in the English language classroom.

The study that conducted on Polish EFL students conveyed that pronunciation self-perception, fear of negative evaluation, and beliefs concerning the pronunciation of the target language is related negatively ( $r=-.60$ ,  $p<.001$ ) to the student's willingness to communicate in English. Harmer (2007, p. 248) argued that teaching pronunciation in some particular cases can help students to get over serious intelligibility problems. Indeed, some EFL learners from certain language groups or background who would need extra time and support in pronouncing English words. Finally, Harmer stated that pronunciation teaching is not only about language speech production, but also about understanding spoken English (Harmer, p. 248).

To sum up, English taught at schools for the first time does not accommodate the general basic psychological state of Indonesian students and as the consequence demotivate them in learning the language. The curriculum neglects their unreadiness; their highly lacking of vocabulary, lacking exposure to spoken forms of words, lacking explicit instruction on small but important things like spelling rules, which if all are available could help them gain some confidence and reduce their anxiety in English classroom.

#### **METODE PENELITIAN**

This article uses a library research method. Studies of English teaching in Indonesia Junior High Schools and other EFL contexts are discussed to see how EFL country students with poor educational system cope with highly-demanding English curriculum achievement. The article will pinpoint the Indonesian students' psychological state towards English class provided at school and

offer a set of working solutions to prevent the students from being overwhelmed with their English classroom anxiety.

#### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

##### **The solution I – Primary School Pre-English Class**

To be able to comprehend English in text levels, the student should be introduced to the smaller chunks of language, like lexicon or vocabulary (Nation, 2017; Ouellette, 2006). Teaching vocabulary to Indonesian primary school students can help them prepare text-based activities like reading paragraph or conversation in Junior High School English class. As primary school age is grouped into young learners, the teaching of vocabulary should be done implicitly, by integrating the vocabularies into activities like songs, games, and small talks.

##### **a. Spoken Vocabulary**

Before print version of the language is introduced, the student needs to be demonstrated the spoken form of the language. Many studies have reported the success of learning through songs, rhymes, teacher's classroom habits like morning circles, and many more activities that involves the oral modelling of English (Bakhsh, 2016; Beck & McKeown, 2007; Chou, 2014; Millington, 2011). Young children have a habit to mentally restructure the phonological forms of any lexicon they frequently hear to save the information into their brain separated from other soundly-similar lexica (Goodrich & Lonigan, 2016; Metsala & Walley, 1998; Ventura, Kolinsky, Fernandes, Querido, & Morais, 2007). For example, if the student hears

words like food, mood, and good in a song, they will restructure them, separating the onset from the coda, like /f.ud/, /m.ud/ and /g.ud/ to discriminate them phonologically as they carry different meaning from one another.

If they continue this habit with more variants of English word families, they will learn to read in English more easily, thus ready for text-based learning. However, at this stage, the spelling should not be the issue yet. The main goal is not to teach them to be literate in English at this point but to grow their interest and curiosity towards the language.

#### b. Print Exposure

As the child is cognitively ready to grasp more complex concepts, English prints can be introduced side by side with pictures. This is also a good time to use their Indonesian knowledge to support their English learning. Introduction of English words can be accompanied by a picture and/or the Indonesian corresponding word.

Introducing the English writing system to Indonesian reading-children means to introduce them to distinct and more complicated spelling rules as English is orthographically more opaque than the Indonesian's (Imanda, 2019). The introduction of the second language writing system or spelling should consider the latest cross-reading theories. According to the Psycholinguistic Grain-Size Theory by Ziegler and Goswami (2006), there at least three factors that need to be noted in teaching children to read in their L2. The first one is availability. All the peculiar phonological information of L2 should be available to the

students, as discussed in the previous section above.

To illustrate, a child with Indonesian-L1 will struggle more to decode words like 'sports', 'masks' or 'bathtubs', than phonologically simpler words like 'dot', 'fill' or 'sister'. The first three words contain consonant-vowel constructions that are absent in their Indonesian L1, like onset /sp/ and codas /rts/ and /sks/. Given these model of word families available around them, perhaps used by the teacher, made heard through songs, used abundantly by their favourite characters in their favourite cartoon serials, then, they will be mentally familiar with the forms. When the print version of this sound construction introduced to them, they will recognise the form more easily.

The second principle is the granularity. Indonesian L1 learners are benefited from their Indonesian alphabetical knowledge in learning the English writing system. Since both languages are written using alphabet letters, the letter knowledge can transfer easily from L1 to L2. A study by Imanda (2019) confirms that to some extent, even with low English vocabulary knowledge, Indonesian grade 2 children can read phonologically decodable words. As Indonesians rely heavily on the phonological or sub-lexical route in decoding a new word, they can easily break the words into smaller phonological units such as into body + coda, e.g. /bu+s/. The grain-size of both Indonesian and English writing systems, which is the phoneme, plays a pivotal role in Indonesian EFL English reading acquisition.

The third principle of reading in a second language according to Ziegler and Goswami (2013) is the consistency. This is dealing with how regular

phoneme-letter relationships are in each language. English is categorised as an opaque language (Caravolas, 2017; Dixon, 2011; Zhang, 2016), or language with less-consistent sound-letter relationships. While Indonesian is the opposite of that, a more transparent with a high consistency between its letters and sounds. One who learns to read for the first time in an orthographically consistent language will tend to apply phonological reading strategy in reading unknown words as what has been illustrated from Irnanda's study (2019) above. When Indonesian children read in English, they will rely on this strategy, too, reading letter-to-letter, instead of lexically, or reading a word as a whole. As a result, they will produce errors when asked to read high-frequent English sight words, like 'I', 'you', 'there', 'here' or 'the' as these words have irregular spelling rules. To minimise the errors, the student can be introduced early to these inconsistent spelt words that have a high degree of appearance in texts. Flashcards, words-on-the-wall, and sight-word games can be employed for achieving this goal.

Overall, teaching English in the primary school of the Indonesian context should be about preparing the students to be an independent learner for their whole life, especially in reading and vocabulary building. At the end of grade 6, they are expected to know a certain number of words, have confidence in saying the words aloud, and have a developing skill in decoding new words independently.

### **The Solution II – Non-Authentic Materials**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is indeed a widely-accepted language learning

principles that are believed to accommodate the targets of English learning: to be able to communicate in English language and culture (Spada, 2007). However, this approach's effectiveness in Indonesia curriculum is debated (Fadilah, 2018). As it is not easy to challenge a policy, adjusting the approach to suit the Indonesian high school context perhaps is the best solution at the moment. The use of authentic communicative texts, should be delayed, at least until the student is competent enough to work on texts that are designed to suit their English level and learning needs. The several alterations that needs to be done are:

#### **a. Less Lexical Less Grammar More Drills**

One of the language learning principles adopted into Indonesian English curriculum is a lexical approach where words or expression are introduced in chunks (Lewis, 2001). As teachers act more like an authority rather than a facilitator in Indonesian English classrooms (Lamb, 2007a), students are expected to master the textbooks, including lists of language chunks with minimum drills. For example, in a chapter about self-introduction, chunks like how are you, I am fine, thank you, are listed together with more than two alternatives. Instead of focusing on the synonyms of the expression or the lexical phrases, students should be aided in drillings one or two of them in an enjoyable oral activity so they can acquire the lexicon more optimally.

Drill, for instance, helps EFL students building their language fluency (Matchett & Burns, 2009) and at the same time practising the lexical knowledge (Chien, 2015; Hong, 2015). As the

students are fluent with how are you- I am fine thank you expression, the teacher can challenge them to drill with different tense or pronouns. To illustrate, the teacher can change the drills to forms like: how is she? She is fine, thank you. How are the kids? They are fine, thank you.

#### b. Explicit Phonics Instruction

Phonics approach, or the explicit instruction of how English sounds and spelling related, is reported efficient in supporting EFL learners in recognising a new English word more quickly (Georgiou, Parrila, & Papadopoulou, 2008; Martínez Martínez, 2011; Westhisi, 2019).

After being introduced to certain basic vocabularies, the student needs to keep reading to expand and increase their vocabulary. As a word consists not only meaning but also the phonological information, a unique sequence of sound, a student needs to understand how spellings in printed words relate to sounds in their spoken version. Malaysian or Singaporean speakers have both spoken and written English abundantly available around them to support their learning (Dixon et al., 2012; Liow & Lee, 2004; Winkler & Widjaja, 2007). In Indonesia, an EFL country, English learning activities is centralised around reading and writing. The printed materials are relatively easier to find and to be made available in the classroom than the audio ones. As the consequence, Indonesian EFL learners are relatively prone to pronunciation errors restricting students in actively participating in the classroom activities or in practising their oral communication skill (Baran-Lucarz, 2014). Teaching them with English alphabetic rules,

perhaps through the integrated lesson, or by allocating a certain time-slot, will boost their English reading-aloud performance (M. Adams, 2003).

### CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

As the Indonesian curriculum promotes English language learning through a communicative language teaching approach, it is important to prepare students to be ready with a high amount of text-based activities. Minimum English spoken experience, lack of vocabulary and relatively psychologically unsupportive classroom atmosphere can cause anxiety and decrease learning motivation. Preparing them with adequate vocabularies and spoken English classroom experience beforehand is beneficial. The use of materials designed for teaching purpose instead of the authentic ones, as well as the explicit instruction on English spelling and pronunciation are two other solutions to prevent the seventh graders become overwhelmed with the school English classroom.

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