



LEARNING L3 ENGLISH EARLY: A DANGER TO L1 INDONESIAN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?

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Abstract: *Since the future of the world is English, many countries now include English in their primary education curriculum, so the language proficiency can be achieved more quickly and effectively. As two or more language knowledge compete linguistically in the brain, the early introduction to English means putting the other languages known by the Indonesian English language learners in a competition. On the other hand, despite its controversy, bilingualism and multilingualism, when achieved fully and proportionally, is cognitively and socially beneficial. This article reviews the potential effects of including English early in the Indonesian curriculum and the recommendation for Indonesian's future multilingual education and research. The discussion resulted in some important conclusions. Firstly, considering the Indonesian-English far typological distance, learning English requires some time and cognitive effort. For Indonesian bilinguals/multilinguals, this early introduction to English means higher confidence in producing the language verbally later on. During this early learning of English, the Indonesian language (and any other ethnic language that forms the speaker's identity) should also be used simultaneously to create the same purpose; a sense of belonging towards and confidence in using the language(s). In short, multilingualism that includes foreign language instruction; national and minority language use and maintenance, should be enhanced and normalised from childhood.*

Keywords : *EFL, Bilingualism, English, Indonesian, Age of Acquisition*

Abstrak: Karena Bahasa Inggris adalah bahasa utama di masa depan, banyak negara mulai memasukkan bahasa Inggris ke dalam kurikulum pendidikan dasar mereka, sehingga kemahiran bahasa ini dapat dicapai dengan lebih cepat dan efektif. Diketahui bahwa dua atau lebih pengetahuan bahasa yang dimiliki seseorang dapat bersaing secara linguistik di otak, maka pengenalan awal bahasa Inggris berarti menempatkan bahasa lain yang dikenal oleh pembelajar bahasa Inggris Indonesia dalam keterancaman. Di sisi lain, terlepas dari kontroversinya, kedwibahasaan dan multibahasa, bila dicapai secara penuh dan proporsional, bermanfaat secara kognitif dan sosial. Artikel ini mengulas dampak potensial dari memasukkan bahasa Inggris ke dalam kurikulum bahasa Indonesia sejak dini dan memberi beberapa rekomendasi untuk pendidikan dan penelitian multibahasa Indonesia di masa depan. Diskusi ini menghasilkan beberapa kesimpulan penting. Pertama, mengingat jarak tipologis Indonesia-Inggris yang jauh, belajar bahasa Inggris membutuhkan waktu dan upaya kognitif yang cukup besar. Bagi orang Indonesia yang bilingual/multilingual, ini berarti pengenalan bahasa Inggris lebih awal dapat memberi kepercayaan diri yang lebih tinggi dalam memproduksi bahasa secara lisan di kemudian hari. Dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris awal ini, bahasa Indonesia (dan bahasa etnis lainnya yang membentuk identitas penutur juga harus digunakan secara bersamaan untuk menciptakan tujuan yang sama; yakni rasa memiliki dan kepercayaan diri dalam menggunakan bahasa). multilingualisme yang mencakup pengajaran bahasa asing; penggunaan dan pemeliharaan bahasa nasional dan minoritas, harus ditingkatkan dan dinormalisasi sejak masa kanak-kanak.

Kata kunci : *ELF, Dwibahasa, Bahasa Inggris, Bahasa Indonesia, Age of Acquisition*

The prestigious status of Bahasa Indonesia, the official language of Indonesia, has increasingly endangered hundreds of other ethnic languages spoken in the archipelago country. Bahasa Indonesia is now spoken as the first rather than second language by children and adolescents in cities and towns of Indonesia (Nababan, 1985; Setiawan, 2013). In the middle of ethnic languages' decreased popularities over the national language, English came into play. Despite its more complex linguistic characteristics than Indonesian, English is still the most learnt foreign language in the developing country. The far typological distance between English and Indonesian (Irnanda, 2018), from the phonological to pragmatic levels, combined with the teacher-centred language approach (Lamb, 2007a), indeed has become the main obstacle for each individual in becoming skilled at English, causing many to see English as a difficult language to master. Indonesian individuals who successfully learn English usually have an exceptional factor; where the motivation is maintained by their relatively advantaged sociocultural background and economic circumstances (Lamb, 2007a; Lamb & Coleman, 2008)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on English language learning strategies within the Indonesian context have been trying to focus on the Indonesian-L1 background only, neglecting the fact that Indonesian English language learners normally have at least another background language. As one gets their Indonesian language improved from formal education, and their English

language knowledge added, the use of home ethnic language decreases. Even though each ethnic language is reported to have its domain of usage, normally for social-gathering purposes, fewer and fewer young generations speak their ethnic language in informal gatherings. Instead of using the local language, young people prefer the Indonesian dialect (Setiawan, 2013), sometimes including English code switches (Lamb, 2007b). To survive, ethnic language has to compete with not only one competitor, but two; Indonesian and English.

Meanwhile, Indonesian and English are competing, too. Despite its peaking popularity, to make things more complicated, English subject is not made compulsory before middle school. This educational policy is intended to protect the national language, Indonesian as well as to prevent English teaching delivered incorrectly by incompatible language teachers since Indonesian public primary schools are not equipped with English teaching staff (Afifah, 2012; Irnanda, 2021). The difference between learning Indonesian and English is that in the first, ethnic-language-speaking people face a relatively little barrier in mastering the Indonesian target language, because, as a second language, it has a very close typological and cultural distance to any of the local language, and it also has an abundant input availability inside and outside of schools. Yet with English, the learning motivation to master the language is fluctuating among most Indonesian individuals due to its relatively complex linguistic regulations, scarce exposure, and ineffective teacher instruction (Lamb & Coleman,

2008). The previous language knowledge, whether it is the Indonesian or ethnic language, cannot support the learning very significantly because of the far typological distance from English.

Despite the big effort and steady motivation required to master English, it is the language targeted by the majority of people. Parents want their children to learn it. Schools offer it as the medium of instruction. Employers train their employees the language skills. And universities require the students to graduate with some English proficiency. Once English is available to everyone, a language shift could happen at any time. Perhaps, it could start with a gradual change of the speakers' attitude towards Indonesian, followed by a heavy code-switch and code-mix of English into Indonesian, and ultimately the birth of pidgin and creole of Indonesian-English such as what happened in Bali, Malaysia, and many other parts of the world. Perhaps, this English's peculiar linguistic and cultural foreignness are two of the reasons why the Indonesian government is more anxious about the existence of English and its effect on the future of Bahasa Indonesia, than it is of the local or ethnic languages; that the very unique characteristics of English can easily alter Indonesian language and culture given the two languages are in contact.

Meanwhile, studies of bilingualism reported the positive correlation of being a proficient bilingual with higher metacognitive ability, flexibility of attention, or the ability to see things in multiple ways (Barac & Bialystok, 2011; Bassetti, 2007; Ter Kuile, Veldhuis, Van Veen, & Wicherts, 2011; Zipke, Ehri, & Cairns, 2009). Although this claim is controversial as some latest studies using a

large number of participants have reported a non-significant correlation between higher executive function and bilingualism (Arizmendi et al., 2018; Nichols, Wild, Stojanoski, Battista, & Owen, 2020), from the perspective of sociolinguistic, multilingual education, regardless of its intellectual benefit, is something advantageous for a society as it promotes diversity, takes part in the local language maintenance and at the same time supporting the community to gain financial success by mastering strategic languages like international or national lingua franca (UNESCO, 2021).

Furthermore, when studied closely by controlling multiple factors, the benefits of being bilingual are still irrefutable. Large sample studies have significant weaknesses, too; it is hard to control the small but important factors, like the onset of learning the language, the type of language knowledge combination, their order or acquisition, their settings of learning, and many more. This study, nevertheless, is not aimed to debate the controversy. As many studies have also pointed out the cognitive advantages of being bilingual, the present study aimed to review the potential cognitive consequences of adding English to the Indonesian primary school curriculum. To be specific, the present study focuses on the cognitive consequences of supporting Indonesian children using their two basic languages and L3 English by analysing the linguistic characteristics of English and Indonesian to determine the right onset time and ways the English language is introduced at school.

METHODS

The study employs an integrative literature review method. This type of literature review design

is intended to overview the knowledge base, critically review and potentially reconceptualize, and expand on the theoretical foundation of the specific topic as it develops (Snyder, 2019, p. 336). The study uses multiple secondary sources to understand the issue of early bilingual and multilingual education in Indonesia, especially regarding the timing of including English in the system.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

English in Indonesia

In Indonesia, English is a foreign language spoken only by minorities of educated people and foreigners, particularly those that come from English-speaking countries. The language is genealogically unrelated to any languages spoken in Indonesia. English is an Indo-European language, while Indonesian, and all the ethnic languages in Indonesia are Austronesians. Orthographically, however, English is not that foreign to Indonesians as it is written in the same alphabetic system, except that the Indonesian alphabet is highly transparent,

whilst English is categorised as opaque due to its high inconsistencies between the sounds and the letters. As a foreign language, English popularity is increasing in Indonesia just as how it is in other countries around the world. In Indonesia, it was made a high school compulsory subject firstly in 1975 and was permitted to be taught as local content for primary school of 4, 5 and 6th graders in 1993, and as a compulsory local content in 2006 (Baedhowi, 2016; Irnanda, 2021). Lastly, from 2013 until today, the language is officially excluded from primary education with the purpose to prevent the cognitive burden among young children, and protect the national language (Afifah, 2012).

Indeed, due to (1) its relatively far typological distance to the Indonesian language, and (2) the dreary traditional methods used by most Indonesian schools in teaching the skills (Lamb, 2007b; Solari, 2014; Yulia, 2013), English is most likely regarded as a difficult language to learn by the Indonesian speakers, except by those minorities who have high intrinsic motivation (Lamb, 2007a). In a study by Nguyen (2011), Indonesian, Thai and Vietnamese students studying in Australia found it hard to study in English. One of the reasons is because of the different linguistic characteristics. For instance, speaking English with correct pronunciation and using the correct tenses or grammar are challenging because of English's different phonological and morphological and syntactical characteristics from their home language.

Other than linguistic differences, the foreign status of English is the other reason why it is proposed to create burnout. English is not even a second language to most Indonesian children, as it

is to French, Malaysian or Philippine children. Learning English means more than learning the rules, it is also about watching closely how those rules work in daily contexts. Lamb and Coleman (2007b) reported that Indonesian speakers who successfully master English come from a circle that supports the use of the language, it can be family or friends. The availability of these support systems will provide the person with a space to test out their English knowledge, for instance through code-mixing or code-switching acts. Without adequate exposure to the contextual use of the language, the English learning journey for most Indonesian-speaking children will be a journey of constant struggle.

Considering the cognitive burden of learning English, when is the right time of giving this international language learning experience to Indonesian children?

The Onset of Acquisition and Its Effects

In the Indonesian context, where English is introduced relatively late, from the age of 12 forward, or after the critical period is over, there are at least two disadvantages experienced by the learner. Firstly, the learner will face a noteworthy challenge in producing the sounds of English as the far discrepancy between the Indonesian simple phonological system and the English relatively complex one. According to the critical period hypothesis, children who are exposed to a second language between the age of 2 and 12 will have an accent-free L2 due to their stopped neuromuscular development (Bongaerts, 1999; Scovel, 1988). English phonological qualities such as intonation, stressed-unstressed syllables, heavy consonant

clusters, a high variety of diphthongs and the long and short vowels are all relatively complex for an Indonesian-speaking learner to acquire without the flexible neuromuscular. Consequently, it is common to find reluctant speakers in Indonesian EFL classrooms because of pronunciation problems.

Secondly, although it is grammatically advantageous to master English as a foreign language at a later age (Singleton & Ryan, 2004), the motivational factor might restrict the success compared to learning it at an earlier age. The positive side of exposing English early appears to be greater confidence in using the language with fewer inhibitions and more willingness to experiment with the language (Jones, 2001, pp. 104–105). Based on a case study in Brunei, it was observed that children who are exposed to English early appear to have more confidence in using the language than those who have little or no exposure to English from an early age (Jones, 2001). This finding explains the finding reported by Lamb (2007b) about the low motivation of Indonesian junior high schoolers in learning English. Many Indonesian English learners reluctantly express themselves in spoken English due to the anxiety of making grammatical mistakes. In other words, age has repressed them to experiment with errors, the potential resource for successful learning.

Therefore, it is beneficial for Indonesian individuals to be introduced to English as early as the primary level to grow a sense of belonging to the language which will help them maintain their learning motivation in later years. Nevertheless,

given the child speaks Indonesian and another home language, such as Acehnese, Javanese, Bataknese or Bugis, the simultaneous acquisition of the three languages early means giving the children a multilingual experience which is also beneficial individually and sociolinguistically. In the following section, the relationship between being a bilingual - a term covering people speaking not only two but more languages- and cognition are discussed.

The Cognitive Effects of Learning L3 English

The effect of bilingualism is inseparable from the language distance factor (Bialystok, 2007). In other words, the bilingual benefits are highly determined by the language types involved, as each language has its level of complexity. English, almost in every linguistic aspect, is more complex than Indonesian national and ethnic languages. For each linguistic level of English-Indonesian discrepancy, a specific ideal route of learning should be researched for the best English learning experience. Knowing English-Indonesian linguistic typological distance, thus, is the key to formulating the right ways and the right time for the English language introduction to the curriculum.

First and foremost, English and Indonesian are different in phonological and orthographic ways. The English language is more complex in terms of the consonant clusters both in the onsets and the codas (Dixon, Chuang, & Quiroz, 2012; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005) which with the frequent exposure to the forms, supports the Indonesian readers in decoding Indonesian Indo-European borrowed words such as *struktur*, *kluster*, which are borrowed from English structure and cluster, respectively

(Irmanda, 2018, 2019). Furthermore, the simultaneous introduction to Indonesian and English contrastive depth orthographies at an early age heightens the possibility of transfer in terms of word reading performance. Inconsistent English orthography requires the learner to learn to read with multi-routes; not only relying on the phoneme-letter relationships but also on other grain sizes of the phonological information; onset, rime or syllable (Goswami, 2008; Kessler & Treiman, 2003; Treiman & Kessler, 1995).

As a child hears and learns a vocabulary, they mentally break the lexicon phonological structure into syllables, body-coda or onset-rime, depending on the particular phonological characteristics of the language they are continually exposed to (Ainsworth, Welbourne, & Hesketh, 2016; Dixon et al., 2012; Metsala & Walley, 1998; Ventura, Kolinsky, Fernandes, Querido, & Morais, 2007). Indonesian is multi-syllabic lexically with clear syllable boundaries. This means that an Indonesian-speaking child will manage their lexical knowledge by the syllabic types. Exposing them to rhyming languages like English will stimulate them to see an alternative way of breaking a word. As English is blurrier in terms of syllable boundaries, a child who is continuously interacting in the English language will be naturally trained to segment words into onset and rime. However, as the English orthography is very inconsistent, it is important to delay the emphasis on the spelling until the learner master the Indonesian consistent orthography relatively well.

Secondly, Indonesian and English morphological systems are quite distinct from each

other. English, like other Indo-European languages, is relatively morphologically richer compared to Austronesian languages. Unlike the Indonesian language, English has subject-verb agreements, where the verb form is determined by the subject. English also has a plural marker added to the root of the noun, and a tense marker such as the -ed ending for past tense. If phonological awareness supports decoding the word sub-lexically, morphological awareness assists the child in reading the word as a whole (Bialystok, Peets, & Moreno, 2014).

Moreover, as morpheme constitutes a meaning, morphological awareness would mean the ability to manipulate words, add suffixes, and prefixes, combine two words or change their form to change the function (e.g., derivation). Many studies of morphological awareness pinpoint vocabulary size as the determinative factor in developing the skill (Wang, Ko, & Choi, 2009; Zhang, 2016; Zhang, Koda, & Sun, 2014). A study by Sumarni (2016) also reported a significant correlation between Indonesian university students' English vocabulary knowledge and their morphological awareness of the language. Thus, introducing English early, although only to the spoken forms, will benefit the Indonesian students later when they are cognitively ready to grasp the language's relatively complex rules. This includes the syntactical related rules, such as active-passive voices, question tags, or dependant and independent clauses.

Lastly, on the lexical and semantical levels, English and Indonesian have their peculiarities. Introducing English language exposure early might decrease the possibility of negative transfer occurring in the students' language production, for

instance, in the form of incorrect collocation pairs. Yet, this type of error perhaps is not that pivotal. As long as the message is successfully communicated, and the learner continues receiving inputs and feedback from the teacher, the learner can still progressively get their English collocation competence improved.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusion

English is an important language that should be taught early to children in Indonesia. Its relatively peculiar characteristics compared to most languages spoken in Indonesia causes the child with Indonesian or/and Austronesian language background to require more time and stronger intrinsic motivation for English successful language learning. This integrative review of Indonesian-English linguistic discrepancies and the cognitive consequences has argumentatively supported the early start of English language education in Indonesia. Given the child is exposed only to the spoken forms of English until they are cognitively ready to bear with the language's complicated grammar and orthographic rules.

Suggestion

Meanwhile, it is suggested that for the primary level, to be in line with the national goal of maintaining the official language and the other hundreds of ethnic languages, it should be only the Indonesian national language used as the main language of instruction at schools. English, at this stage, can be a subject introduced communicatively, mostly through play rather than formal instruction. Meanwhile, the ethnic language, when necessary, could be a helpful tool for the child in understanding

difficult concepts taught in various subjects.

Nevertheless, this study did not provide a solution of how English should fit into the theme-based curriculum that is currently used in Indonesian primary schools. More studies should be directed on this focus to increase the English-competent of human resources in Indonesia.

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