

One Size does not Fit All: Unravelling the Needs of English Teachers in Primary Schools in Indonesia

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Abstract: The emergence of English as a global language has been posited to have considerable impact on practices and language policies (Nunan 2003). In Indonesia the considerable investment on early instruction of English is however confronted with acute shortage of qualified, proficient, and competent teaching force. This background necessitates the conduct of a comprehensive study to reveal the needs of teachers of English in primary schools (Chodidjah 2008, Zein 2009). Reviewing data from literature the paper suggests that the pool of English professionals at primary level can be categorised into five groups, each displaying different educational backgrounds and level of experience. The various backgrounds of these English practitioners as well as their length of experience reveal diverse needs. This paper argues that teacher education is of necessity, but it should be one that is able to address a wide range of needs prevailing in the domain of English in elementary education in Indonesia.

Keywords: language teacher education, English teachers, language policy, primary level education

1. Introduction

The Decree of Ministry of Education and Culture No. 60/1993, states that a primary school is allowed to teach English as a local content subject to students in Year 4, 5, and 6, given the following conditions are met: 1) the society in which the school is located requires it; 2) the school meets certain qualifications such as the availability of the teachers and the facilities to accommodate teaching-learning activities. Even though English is only optional, the decision to drift down the age to which English instruction is offered is ubiquitous. While ten years ago most primary schools offered English to students in Year 4, 5, and 6, at present it is offered since Year 1 for 2x35 minutes/week. In schools with higher prestige the length of English instruction is even increased into up to 4x35 minutes/week for higher classes. Even though no specific figures can be given for how many primary schools have decided to offer English instruction, it seems that almost all primary schools in cities and suburban areas and some in rural areas have managed to start English instruction (Chodidjah 2008a).

The introduction of English in primary schools is however afflicted with problems in the provision of qualified teachers. A common issue occurring in less affluent schools which are normally located in rural areas is that the number of unqualified teachers is increasing. It is of no surprise that in these schools teachers of other subjects or classroom teachers are transferred or asked to teach English. In some rural areas a teacher is assigned to teach English in a number of different schools. On the other hand, graduates of English departments wishing to teach in primary schools are generally not ready due to their lack of practical experiences during their pre-service teacher education (Musthafa 2010).

In light of this context, the paper reviews relevant literature on primary school English education in Indonesia. First and foremost, it specifically highlights the profile of English teachers at primary level education. It further argues that a policy to educate this group of teachers is of necessity. The planning processes however should take into account the diverse needs of the teachers by exercising consultations with policymakers as well as stakeholders. Findings emerging from the study will be useful to provide

substantial grounds for the development of policy which can cater for the specific needs of the teachers. Concluding remarks are provided by the end of the paper.

2. The Profile of English Teachers in Primary Schools in Indonesia

The latest report from the Ministry of National Education on the statistics on primary education reveals that there are 47, 577 primary school English teachers in Indonesia (Departemen 2009). These teachers can be further categorised into five groups as following.

2.1. Group One: Graduates of Primary School Teacher Education

A large portion of English teachers in primary schools in Indonesia consist of those who graduate from Primary School Teacher Education program (*Pendidikan Guru Sekolah Dasar-henceforth PGSD*). Graduates of PGSD will have acquired knowledge and skills related to young learner pedagogy, classroom pedagogy, theories of teaching, educational philosophies, teaching practicum, learning assessment, among others (PGSD FIP UNNES 2011). The appointment of these teachers is usually platformed by the unavailability of qualified English teachers. Teachers who are considered to have better command of English in comparison to other teachers are then appointed to teach English, while in some cases classroom teachers were asked to teach English.

A typical weakness of this group of teachers is that they did not undertake extensive amount of English upgrading classes during their studies. Their English proficiency in all areas of macro-skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) as well as micro-skills (grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary) is considered poor (Chodidjah 2008a). Because they were not specifically trained to teach English in primary schools it is not surprising that these teachers were also lacking of good command of knowledge in English. The good thing about this pool of teachers is that their experience in dealing with primary school students and young learner pedagogy is extensive. Even though they may not have proper training in English, their specific education for teaching in primary schools is proven to be most useful in equipping them with knowledge to deal with young learners. Having taught English for many years, many of these teachers did not find it difficult to build a good rapport with students and accommodate the needs of students from diverse backgrounds (Chodidjah 2008a).

2.2. Group Two: Graduates of Other Non-English Programs

Some proportion of the existing English teachers in primary schools consists of graduates of other non-English programs such as Biology, Mathematics, Indonesian Language, etc. Similar to teachers in the first group, the appointment of this group of teachers is due to the unavailability of other occupational options relevant to their academic qualifications. Some primary school principals whose school does not have qualified English teachers hire applicants who are graduates of non-English programs to teach English because they generally have good English proficiency.

Graduates of other Non-English programs and PGSD alike have not undertaken English for Young Learners, but are equipped with a unit called *English for University Students*, which is offered for 4 credit points (200 minutes/week) to provide some general English preparation for the students. They are equipped with knowledge and skills specific to the nature of their major, but are not pedagogically prepared to teach English at any levels of education in Indonesia. Since they are not specifically prepared to teach English it is of no surprise that their pedagogical skills are poor. Various studies have reported that this group of teachers are experiencing major problems in the areas of classroom management, curriculum design and development, and pedagogical skills. Another factor that this group of teachers is lacking is experience in dealing with young learners, which adversely affects their pedagogical practices in the classroom (Suyanto 2010).

2.3. Group Three: Graduates of English Study Program

English Study Program is a four year undergraduate degree consisting of 146 credit points. Graduates of English Study Program will have acquired strong foundation on areas of English linguistics (e.g. phonology, syntax, morphology, and semantics) and English literature (prose, poem, and drama). They are conferred with a Bachelor in English Language and Literature. English for Young Learners is not offered to students of

this program, but English pedagogy is expected to be covered in general from units such as *Teaching English as a Foreign Language* (TEFL) and *Language Learning Assessment* (Universitas Negeri Malang 2011b).

This group of teachers has been prepared well with units related to English skills (Universitas Negeri Malang 2010b); thus they may become a good language model for their students. While their knowledge on English semantics, syntax, and phonology may be sufficient, this group of teachers is in great need of knowledge related to pedagogical matters such as teaching methods, curriculum development, assessment, as well as young learners pedagogy (Suyanto, 2010). Curriculum development was found highly problematic by approximately 78.6% of teachers participating in a study conducted by Suyanto (2005). Specific areas in which they were reported to having difficulties with were curriculum development, designing syllabus, developing assessment tasks, and applying appropriate techniques in the classroom to the appropriate context. Another issue with this group of teachers is related to their lack of experience with young learner pedagogy and their low level of familiarization with English teaching in SD (Chodidjah 2008a). Teachers in this group are usually novice; they are fresh graduates or students in their third or fourth year in their study who are not prepared to specifically teach English in SD.

2.4. Group Four: Graduates of English Language Education Program Minus EYL

Graduates of English Language Education Program will have acquired strong English language proficiency knowledge, and knowledge and skills related to curriculum, syllabus, language testing and assessment, teaching methodologies, teaching skills, materials development, among others. After undertaking a four-year degree study consisting of 146 credit points, upon graduation they are conferred with a Bachelor of Education in English. This group consists of graduates of English Language Education Program that does not offer English for Young Learners in their curriculum. During their studies, these teachers are given proper training on approaches and methods in English language teaching, teaching skills, curriculum design, material development, and authentic assessment.

This group of teachers consists of those who are generally proficient English speakers because they have undertaken units such as *Literal Listening*, *Interpretive Listening*, *Speaking for Group Activities*, *Speaking for Formal Setting* (Universitas Negeri Malang 2011a). With such strong preparation it is likely that this group of teachers could become a good English language model to their students. Their knowledge of English linguistics is also considered sufficient because they have undertaken units such as *Semantics*, *Syntax*, *English Grammar*, and others.

The fact that they have not undertaken EYL distinguishes this group from the fifth group of teachers. One thing in common amongst members of this group of teachers is that they are not familiar with various topics and issues related to teaching English to young learners such as children language acquisition, young learners' psychology, children's learning development, and young learners learning strategy. Generally the teachers may be considered competent but may need extra pedagogical training specifically designed for dealing with young learners (Suyanto 2010).

2.5. Group Five: Graduates of English Language Education Program Offering EYL

Group five and group four alike are equipped with appropriate training on pedagogy, especially on areas such as approaches and methods in English language teaching, curriculum design, material development, and assessment. A proper training in English education assists them in improving their language proficiency so they could become proficient English speakers and good English language model to their students. Various units in English linguistics have also provided them with a great deal of knowledge in the areas such as *Semantics*, *Syntax*, *English Grammar*, *Morphology*, *Phonology*, and others.

What distinguishes this group from Group Four is that the group is prepared with English for Young Learners (EYL). It is an elective unit offered in some English Language Education programs such as in State University of Malang (Universitas Negeri Malang 2011a). The unit generally covers issues such as young learner pedagogy, children language acquisition, and teaching methodologies for young learners within 200 minutes/week, equivalent to 4 credit points. The aim of EYL is to enable student teachers to be familiar with issues in young learner pedagogy such as children language acquisition, psychological development of children, young learners learning strategy, etc. (Musthafa 2010). What needs to be improved on this group of

teachers is however the extension of their experience. It has been reported that graduates of college education are not generally ready to teach in schools. Sufficient provision on practical issues and technicalities of teaching as well as introduction to teaching environment in primary schools are indispensable (Suyanto 2010).

3. Discussion: One Size Does Not Fit All

The characters of the teachers vary between one group and another. Each group displays strengths which may be weaknesses for the other groups. While their language proficiency is generally poor in all macro and micro language skills, the teachers in Group One tend to be more mature and experienced when dealing with young learners. Teachers in Group Four and Five, however, is in direct opposition to this as they are mostly novice teachers whose experience is lacking and yet are generally proficient English speakers. It seems that the lack of English proficiency of the teachers in Group One is compensated with their versatility in dealing with learners of various backgrounds and their ability in addressing their needs. They may not be a proficient language model for their students, but their experience in dealing with young learners is of significant value.

The teachers in Group Two are considered pedagogically weak. Similar to teachers in Group Three and Group Four, they are also unfamiliar with issues pertinent to teaching English to primary level students. What these groups of teachers need are provision on pedagogical theories and practices as well as on issues *English for Young Learners*. One thing in common between teachers in these three groups is that they are novice, inexperienced teachers whose acquaintance with school environment may only occur during their first day of teaching.

The educational background of the teachers and their level of experience hitherto vary. The various backgrounds of practitioners as well as their length of experience reveal diverse needs. Different needs require different treatments; one size does not fit all. Teacher education is of necessity, but it should cater for a wide range of issues prevailing in the domain of English in elementary education in Indonesia.

A call for a specific study which specifically focuses on the needs of English teachers in primary schools has been made by Chodidjah (2008b) and Zein (2009). Such an impetus is invaluable in language planning process. As Kaplan & Baldauf (1997) suggested that language policymaking necessitates the knowledge of what goals are to be achieved in line with "...the current language situation...in the polity so that processes can be put in place to reach those objectives" (p. 87). Findings emerging from the study are meant to put in place the current situation of the political spectrum of teacher education for English teachers in primary schools in Indonesia. In other words it provides substantial grounds for the development of policy to cater for the specific needs of primary school English teachers in Indonesia.

4. Conclusion

With the introduction of English in primary schools, the demand for qualified teachers of English has continuously increased over the past few years. The growth of the number of English learners collides with the sophistication of the teachers working with the students. In Indonesia, despite a greater awareness of knowledge base for successful teaching English learners, adequate preparation for working with English language learners is not available for many teachers. Such grim picture obviously is not conducive for achieving success in elementary English instruction (Freeman & Freeman 2010).

The success of a language policy depends largely on efficacy of the teachers carrying out the policy proposals at pedagogic level (Widdowson 1993). The paper has demonstrated that a language policy on educating primary school English teachers in Indonesia is of necessity, yet it should however be the one that comprehensively caters for the wide ranging needs of various groups teaching English in primary school education.

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