

# Elementary English education in Indonesia: Policy developments, current practices, and future prospects

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How has Indonesia coped with the demand for teaching English in schools?

With a current figure reaching more than 26 million (Kementrian, 2015), Indonesia is second after China in terms of the number of children learning English as a foreign language in elementary schools. This paper examines the development of elementary English education in Indonesia, and shows that it has been undergoing a great transformation in recent years. The paper begins by providing an overview of policy developments relating to elementary English education in the country. It then discusses current practices in elementary English education in relevant areas, focusing in particular on classroom size and length of instruction, the role and status of teachers, and pedagogical concerns. Finally, the paper analyzes the prospects for elementary English education in the foreseeable future.

## Policy developments

Groups of enthusiastic parents, teachers and administrators in Malang Regency, East Java, pioneered the movement of elementary English education in Indonesia in 1985 when they held meetings to discuss its feasibility. Following these meetings, the Local Educational Office of Malang Regency decided to introduce English as an extra-curricular subject in 352 elementary schools. In 1989 the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) conducted a nationwide survey on English teaching involving parents, teachers, and students of public and private secondary schools. The survey highlighted the importance of English for successful

completion of study and concluded that higher English proficiency was to be considered necessary for wider employment opportunities. The survey also revealed that the English proficiency of most senior high school graduates was far from satisfactory, even after six years of study. The absence of a robust foundation that could have been provided at elementary level was considered the main cause of this problem; it was thought that early English education would provide stronger preparation for children prior to entering secondary schools (Sadtono, 2007).

These conclusions notwithstanding, nothing changed at a national level for several more years. English was only taught in Malang and



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several elite schools in other cities as an extra-curricular subject. It was only in 1992 that the government followed up on the 1989 survey. In a national symposium on education held by MoEC, it was acknowledged that parents were demanding the government to introduce elementary English education as a necessary educational investment. On the basis of this, the symposium made a recommendation to the government to teach English in elementary schools. MoEC followed this recommendation by releasing Decree No. 060/U/1993. Through this decree the government allowed a school to teach English as a local content subject from Grade 4 onwards if: 1) the society in which the school is located requires it; and 2) the school has qualified teachers and can guarantee facilities to accommodate proper teaching-learning activities (Sadtono, 2007).

Entering the new millennium, there was another resurgence of interest in English within Indonesian society. Parents in many parts of the country were aware that the increasingly globalized world meant that strong preparation in English education would be vital in the coming years. Furthermore, parents also believed in the importance of elementary English education for early language acquisition (Chodidjah, 2008; Lestari, 2003; Rachmajanti, 2008). The majority of Zein's (2009) respondents, for example, believed in the notion 'the earlier the better', that is, the value of an early start and the advantages it offers to children as they learn to acquire a foreign language. They further assumed that elementary English education would contribute to the development of a more positive attitude and higher motivation

toward the language among the Indonesian workforce of the future.

It is no surprise that during the early years of 2000, there was a tendency for parents to enroll their children in a school that offers English. School principals feared that numbers would decrease if they failed to respond to it, so they offered English instruction. Some even lowered the level at which English was introduced into the curriculum to as early as Grade 1. In order to cope with the staffing shortage caused by this expansion of provision, most of these principals appointed teachers without relevant qualifications, such as those graduating from a university in a subject other than English or English language education (Chodidjah, 2008).

In 2006 the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) released Decree No. 22/2006 on The Structure of National Curriculum. The decree stipulates English as a local content subject with an instruction period of up to  $2 \times 35$  minutes per session. Schools were given the freedom to start teaching English earlier than Grade 4 and were asked to implement a competency-based curriculum developed at the Local Education Unit (*Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Terpadu* – henceforth KTSP). This curriculum requires children graduating from elementary schools to be able to develop competencies in the four macro-skills within the school context (Madya, 2007) (see Table 1).

A drastic shift occurred in 2012 when MoNE planned to replace the KTSP curriculum with Curriculum 2013. This new curriculum was formulated in the spirit of the 2003 Education Act, which requires education to be conducted democratically,

**Table 1: Competency objectives based on the KTSP curriculum**

Language Skills	Competency Objectives
Listening	To understand instructions, information, and simple stories through conversations within the contexts of classroom, schools, and the neighborhood.
Speaking	To verbally express the meaning of simple interpersonal and transactional discourses in the form of instructions and information within the contexts of classroom, schools, and the neighborhood.
Reading	To be able to read aloud and understand the meaning of instructions and information as presented in short and simple functional, descriptive, and pictorial texts within the contexts of classroom, schools, and the neighborhood.
Writing	To be able to write words, phrases, and short functional texts with correct spelling and proper punctuation.

equally and non-discriminatorily based on human rights, religious values, cultural values and national pluralism. Some education experts in the country argued that elementary education should focus on the development of children's character building through the dissemination of the religious and cultural values that have become the norm in the country. They believed that this is necessary before children are exposed to the foreign culture associated with English, which may not entirely conform to indigenous religious and cultural values (Alwasilah, 2012). Another argument is that the teaching of English in many elementary schools has been done at the expense of indigenous languages, implying the potential for language loss. Hadisantosa (2010: 31) noted that '... with (the) emerging and mushrooming demand for English, schools then drop the local language in order to give more time to the English teaching.' Therefore, it was suggested elementary English education be seconded in order to give curricular space for indigenous languages. There was also an argument highlighting children's cognitive immaturity and thus supposed inability to deal with simultaneous language instruction, implying that they would need to develop linguistic competence in their mother tongue prior to learning a foreign language like English. Furthermore, the teaching of English in elementary schools has been far from successful, so it was deemed more prudent to concentrate on teaching English in secondary schools where teachers can deliver more intensive instruction (Alwasilah, 2012).

It did not take more than six months for the change to occur. In mid 2013 MoNE endorsed the piloting of Curriculum 2013 in 2,598 model elementary schools throughout the country, and a few months later major provinces such as DKI Jakarta (the capital region) banned all public elementary schools from teaching English during school hours. This curricular alteration generated protests among parents who wanted schools to maintain English in their timetable. Teachers who had lost or were going to lose work took part in demonstrations, demanding the government to be more supportive of their employment concerns. Proponents of elementary English education also lamented the fact that a new curriculum was introduced when many teachers were still unable to appropriately implement KTSP (Wahyuni, 2014).

The year 2014 witnessed another policy change following the result of the National Election. A structural alteration in MoNE meant the educational ministry became the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC). The newly

appointed MoEC Minister made a political manoeuvre within months of his appointment by assigning a team of experts to conduct a nationwide revision of Curriculum 2013. While the revision was underway, the piloting of Curriculum 2013 remained in effect in the model elementary schools (Wahyuni, 2014). The other schools that were not ready to implement Curriculum 2013 were to operate within the KTSP curriculum guidelines. A nationwide implementation of Curriculum 2013 would only occur after the completion of the curriculum revision and successful piloting.

The most recent policy change to be reported in this article occurred in July 2015, when the MoEC Minister urged schools to teach three languages: Indonesian as the national language, an indigenous language of the school's choice, and English as a foreign language. This was made against the backdrop of ongoing public outcry about English provision and in preparation for the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) Economic Society treaty, which took place in December 2015. This is also in alignment with the plan of MoEC to implement the Act No. 24/2009 on the Flag, Languages and the National Anthem and Symbol of Indonesia, which stipulates the necessity of teaching the national language, local languages, and foreign languages (Indopos, 2015). It is unclear whether this decision would also affect the 2,598 model schools that are still implementing Curriculum 2013 - a ministerial decree to officialise it has not been endorsed yet. In the meantime, schools are still implementing the 2006 KTSP curriculum.

## Current practices

### Classroom size and length of instruction

A typical classroom in a public school in Indonesia consists of 30–40 students, with some exceeding 45, with the desks organized in rows and students sitting in four rows and six lines. English lesson is taught up to  $2 \times 35$  minutes (70 minutes) per week. This means children typically receive up to 46.67 hours of instruction in a 40 week academic year ( $70 \times 40 = 2800$  minutes = 46.67 hours).

Given the number of students in the average classroom, some parents are concerned that their children do not receive adequate individual attention from the teacher. They believe that significant progress in English is only possible through private studies outside the school, where children could receive an additional 2 to 8 hours of English instruction per week. In order to compensate for

the limited practical value of the language in daily life, these parents also provide means that would enable their children to engage in a variety of English-related activities outside school such as English pop music, English language TV programs or films (subtitled in Indonesian), Playstation games, and English story-books and magazines (Sadtono, 2007).

### Teachers

There are two kinds of elementary English teachers in Indonesia: generalist and specialist teachers. The fact that there are only an estimated 62,883 specialist teachers across approximately 95% of the 177,985 elementary schools that teach English (Kementrian, 2015) suggests that the gap is filled by generalist teachers. The differences between these two groups of teachers are summarized in Table 2.

Various studies have reported that generalist teachers implement traditional approaches in which they read aloud or dictate the content of a book and ask the children to repeat; they then write on the board and ask the students to copy (Egar, Sukmaningrum, & Musarokah, 2015; Jazadi, 2000; Lestari, 2003). These teachers often struggle to integrate language skills (Egar *et al.*, 2015), do not pay much attention to children’s characters or learning development (Lestari, 2003), and are more concerned with covering materials in the coursebook (Hawanti, 2011). Furthermore, the majority of these teachers deliver the lesson in the

mother tongue of the children, either Indonesian or an indigenous language, primarily due to a self-perceived low level of communicative competence in the target language (Chodidjah, 2008).

The pedagogical practice of specialist teachers, on the other hand, varies from one case to another. Asriyanti *et al.* (2013), for example, found cases of teachers in South Sulawesi struggling in terms of both classroom management and in using English as the language of instruction. Hawanti (2014) reported a study in Banjarnegara, Central Java where teachers’ over-reliance on coursebooks as a replacement for the curriculum reveals a lack of pedagogical content knowledge and subject matter knowledge (English language). On the other hand, there are cases of what Husein (2014) called ‘exemplary teachers’, that is, highly proficient teachers who are able to deliver lessons that match the specific needs of children.

There are several factors adversely affecting the pedagogical performance of elementary English teachers. First, with more than 30 students crammed into a medium-size room, teachers struggle to maintain order in the classroom. Encouraging student-centered learning for communicative activities has been less of a concern compared to maintaining classroom discipline (Asriyanti *et al.*, 2011; Egar *et al.*, 2015). Second, opportunities for the professional development of teachers are limited, with many training programs available only for civil servant-ranking teachers, whereas others are reserved for those

**Table 2: Differences between generalist and specialist teachers**

Criteria	Generalist teachers	Specialist teachers
Teach English to ...	Children in their own classroom	Children across grades (1–6)
Teach other subjects	Yes	No
Qualifications	BA in Elementary Education	Either: BA in English Language Education BA in English Language, or BA in other majors
Young learner pedagogy	Yes	No
English language proficiency	Generally low	Varies, from low to high
Employment status	Civil servant	Non-civil servant
Entitled to	Full scale salary Remuneration Health benefits	One-third to one-sixth salary

with connections with local power-wielders. Even those training programs that are available are often hamstrung by mismatches between the contents of the programs and the professional needs of the teachers (Zein, 2016a). Third, poor employment conditions related to teachers' low status and income also contribute significantly to specialist teachers' low morale. Many teachers have to juggle teaching in several different schools in order to make ends meet.

### **Pedagogical concerns**

The KTSP curriculum stipulates a communicative pedagogy for English education in Indonesia and expects teachers to design and deliver communicative tasks and activities in the classroom (Madya, 2007). However, the test-oriented educational system inhibits them from doing so, as they tend to teach in order to prepare children to sit for the tests rather than delivering more communicative activities. It has also been argued that the employment of multiple choice and reading comprehension questions in the tests does not offer much information about students' actual language skills, and is also counterproductive to the development of students' communicative competence (Hawanti, 2011).

Teachers also have difficulties in finding culturally appropriate teaching materials. The imported coursebooks are generally not appropriate to the local Indonesian cultures, while those produced by local publishers do not place emphasis on cultural values and rely too much on superficial content. In addition, the proliferation of the theme-based instruction in local coursebooks is reading-based; it does not allow space for listening to authentic native-speaking discourses and more communicative-based activities (Jazadi, 2000).

### **Future prospects**

With the mounting challenges that teachers face on a day-to-day basis as well as the pressing need for focusing on the broader social and cultural development of children, the suggestion to focus English language education solely on secondary schools remains ever-present (Alwasilah, 2012). But postponing English education until secondary schools denies the macro-policy factors that have contributed to the conception of elementary English education. Elementary English education is a phenomenon too prevalent to be ignored or to be left out for a second time. The demand for elementary English education is overwhelmingly strong, and the support among parents for its

implementation has never ceased (Egar *et al.*, 2011; Hawanti, 2014; Lestari, 2003; Zein, 2009). Even Rachmajanti's (2008) assertion to start elementary English education in Grade 4 instead of 1 has done little to dampen parental enthusiasm. Postponing instruction until secondary school may only result in another outbreak of public unrest as happened in 2013 when the plan to remove English from the elementary school timetable was implemented.

The MoEC Minister himself has already made a political move that could provide a framework for the establishment of simultaneous instruction in which the teaching of indigenous languages, Indonesian, and English is made viable within the elementary school curriculum. Such a policy offers to ensure that the teaching of one language is not done at the expense of another, and it appears to be a strategic language policy whereby all languages representing societal needs at the local, national, and global levels are accommodated. The implementation of such a policy is even in alignment with the 2003 Education Act, which aspires to a democratic vision of education that values religious and cultural values associated with Indonesian and indigenous languages without neglecting the global aspirations that are linked to English.

However, the urge to teach English in schools will not create much impact if there is no policy decree. And even if a formal, written policy is endorsed, strong attention to micro-level language policy will be required. At present there has been no sign of a policy to reduce the class size for the 177,985 elementary schools to meet the ideal size in language classrooms of 16–18 students. Attempts to do so in the vast and diverse geographical area of the country would not only imply doubling (or even tripling?) the number of the elementary schools but would also create an avalanche of effects on other aspects of education such as the teaching of other subjects and the provision of facilities and teaching materials. If this option is to be taken, an enormous amount of funding will be required, and it may take decades to implement. This means micro-level language policy needs to concentrate on other fundamental aspects that would bring more immediate effects in the meantime.

One thing that is already clear at the current time is that extending the length of instruction, though highly recommended, may not be feasible. The elementary education curriculum is already crowded enough even without English; adding further hours in order to accommodate English

instruction may only place an extra and unwelcome burden on children. Second, there is little chance that curriculum planners would reduce the hours of the core components in the elementary curriculum (e.g. basic literacy, Indonesian language) in order to give more curricular space for English. A proposal for longer hours to be devoted to English is thus highly unlikely to prevail.

This implies that a fundamental reconsideration on the objectives of elementary English education is necessary. Requiring elementary school graduates to master basic competencies in the four macro-skills may be too much of an expectation. Curriculum planners need to be realistic about what children can and should achieve given the limited amount of instruction that they receive on a weekly basis. Moreover, they need to adopt a holistic view of multilingualism that caters to the linguistic and cultural diversity that is already a typical feature of the Indonesian classroom. This approach 'aims at integrating the curricula of the different languages to activate the resources of multilingual speakers. In this way multi-lingual students could use their resources cross-linguistically and become more efficient language learners than when languages are taught separately' (Cenoz, 2013: 13).

How the adoption of a holistic view of multilingualism can be effectively enacted in the Indonesian context is a question that requires further research. However, it is clear that the adoption will have an impact on teaching materials, which need to allow for the provision of communicative-based activities while ensuring the preservation of local culture. It will also have an impact on pedagogy, which needs to move away from its current test-orientation to a more communicative and culturally inclusive pedagogy that raises awareness of the use of English as a global language and builds confidence in the linguistic repertoire and cultural diversity occurring in the classroom.

Furthermore, overhauling the teacher education system is vital in order to enhance teacher professionalism. Given the fact that English departments only prepare prospective teachers to teach in secondary schools, there needs to be specific teacher preparation such as a minor in elementary English education for those aspiring to embark upon the profession as specialist teachers. On the other hand, those studying for a BA in Elementary Education need stronger provision of English in order to increase their own level of proficiency as well as help them teach it to their students (Zein, 2016b). Regular and systematically designed professional development programs

need to be provided for practicing teachers. Equal participation needs to be the benchmark for developing such professional development programs in order to encourage the involvement of all teachers, regardless of their status and occupational connection (Zein, 2016c). Efforts to compensate specialist teachers' contribution must also be maximized. Measures to ensure job security through appointing teachers as civil servants, employing them full-time, increasing their salaries, and providing health care and remuneration are necessary given the considerable value that the society places upon English.

Finally, there needs to be a strategy to increase the quality of parental support while reducing the gap resulting from more well-off parents sending their children to private English schools outside of normal class time. Setiasih (2014) suggested that a family language learning program may be a solution that would allow parents to be more proactive in their involvement in their children's literacy practices. By building stronger cooperation with schools in family language learning, she asserted that 'parents will develop a better understanding of their children's learning and become more confident in themselves as supporters of their children's English literacy education' (Setiasih, 2014: 95).

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