

Is foreign language taught early or late in Indonesia?

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Abstract

Curriculum 2013 (K-13) changes the structure of basic education where children should be emphasized more on teaching about the religious values and culture of the state before they were exposed to foreign language. So, English is not compulsory subject that is taught in elementary school. Some literatures on second language learning recommends many factors that influence the success of learning language such as learning style, personality, motivation, and age. The age factor in learning foreign language is still becoming topic of debate, whether English is learnt early or late. In Indonesia, in the level of elementary school, English is taught as local content and not every elementary school choose English for that subject. Responding that issue this study mainly discussed about how age factor support learning English as foreign language. This study is critical analysis relevant books and journals. This conveyed that the age factor influence the foreign learning. Children are able to learn English before they turn to 12 years old, that stage language skills are developed. The teachers need to pay attention to the special young learners' characteristic and optimally build the input comprehension of learners. And the English learning and teaching process should use also appropriate methods and techniques to create the real life environment. And Indonesia government should revitalize curriculum and facilitate the learning and teaching process, especially for foreign language.

Keywords:

Foreign Language; Taught Early; Indonesia

Introduction

Learning is a process to acquire or gain skill and knowledge. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the process of learning language after the native language has been learned. Second language learning is a process of internalizing and making sense of a second language after one has an established first language. Second language learning is different with second language acquisition. Krashen defines learning as a process between acquiring and utterance¹. In other words language acquisition happens in subconscious system; however, language learning happens in conscious system. Learning a second language is not same as learning first language. Learning first language has been started since baby who unable to speak, only babbling, cooing, and crying. While second language is learnt after being able to speak and it has absorbed knowledge, which influences them in learning a second language.

¹ Tao Gong, Lan Shuai, and Xiaolong Yang, "A Simulation on Coevolution between Language and Multiple Cognitive Abilities," *Journal of Language Evolution*, 2022.

Some literatures on second language learning recommends many factors that influence the success of learning language such as learning style, personality, motivation, and age. Among those factors, the age factor has been being debated whether early age students start learning better than older students. Some researches were conducted about the age factor in learning language. According to Hadna Suyantari stated that young children do better than adult in learning language². Adults who learn a new language are not interactive but an early year is the ideal age to learn English³. Rocio Dominguez and Silvia Pessoa in their research found that learning foreign language at early age develop students' oral and writing skill and confident in using target language.⁴

According to a Research by Ellen Bialystok and Michelle Martin Rhee at York University in Toronto as cited in educational northwest "found that bilingual preschoolers have greater cognitive flexibility"⁵, in other words, children are able to think not only in two concepts, but also in several ones simultaneously, it is obvious when looking at the quotation above that bilingual children will become critical thinkers in problem-solving when they get older, in turn bilingualism will facilitate the learning process in High Schools.

While Simone E. Pfenninger and David Singleton found that lack of age effect on foreign language achievement in the term of affective factors that higher achievers felt very easy in learning English but not for low achievers, and contextual factors, transition from English in primary school to secondary school⁶. Adult learn a new language has a benefit because they can think well.⁷

Based on those issues, this paper aims to explain when English should be taught, whether early stage or late stage. It is an important issue on learning English in Indonesia, because it influences the educational policy especially in Indonesia for English is a foreign language that is taught in certain elementary school, in other word English is not an urgent subject and also not as a compulsory subject in elementary school.

² Hadna Suryantari, "Children and Adults in Second-Language Learning," *Tell: Teaching of English Language and Literature Journal* 6, no. 1 (2018): 30.

³ Stano Kong, "Adult Mandarin Chinese Speakers' Acquisition of Locational and Directional Prepositional Constructions in Second Language English," *Lingua* 249 (2021): 102993.

⁴ Rocío Domínguez and Silvia Pessoa, "Early versus Late Start in Foreign Language Education: Documenting Achievements," *Foreign Language Annals* 38, no. 4 (2005): 473–80.

⁵ Elena Nicoladis, Dorothea Hui, and Sandra A Wiebe, "Language Dominance and Cognitive Flexibility in French-English Bilingual Children," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 1697.

⁶ Simone E Pfenninger and David Singleton, "Making the Most of an Early Start to L2 Instruction," *Language Teaching for Young Learners* 1, no. 2 (2019): 111–38.

⁷ Munassir Alhamami, "Beliefs about and Intention to Learn a Foreign Language in Face-to-Face and Online Settings," *Computer Assisted Language Learning* 31, no. 1–2 (2018): 90–113.

Result and Discussion

English as foreign language in Indonesia

The National Education System Law stated that foreign languages can be learnt and taught in certain educational units to support students' foreign language skills. So in the curriculum 2004, English was stated to be a subject as local content which was aimed to improve the quality of education, especially teaching local content of Elementary School English. This makes the popularity of English as a part of subjects in elementary schools growing rapidly, thus elementary schools were competing to apply English in the classroom as a foreign language.

English experienced significant development. Even kindergarten schools had begun to introduce English.⁸ English was a promotion for schools and pride for parents. Schools that teach English are considered more prestigious than schools that do not have English in their subjects⁹. In the early 2000s parents prefer sending their children to schools that offered English as part of the local content subject.

The local content as part of the subjects taught in elementary schools is actually a manifestation of the locally applicable section which is intended to equip students with the skills deemed necessary by the region so that the provision of local content is adjusted to the surrounding circumstances and needs. In general, local content subjects are filled with local languages, but along with public awareness of the importance of English, many elementary schools have finally added English as local content. With the local content program, it is hoped that elementary school graduates who do not continue to the higher education will have more skills in the form of foreign languages that can be used to earn a living.¹⁰

In further developments, English for elementary school is increasingly recognized as stated in the 2006 Education Unit Level Curriculum (KTSP). Based on the Minister of National Education Regulation Number 22 of 2006 concerning Content Standards and the Minister of National Education Regulation Number 23 of 2006 concerning Graduate Competency Standards, English is one of the mandatory local content for all elementary school students from grades I to class VI with the allocation of learning time provided is 2x35 minutes of study hours

⁸ Sjafty Nursiti Maili, "Bahasa Inggris Pada Sekolah Dasar: Mengapa Perlu Dan Mengapa Dipersoalkan," *JUDIKA (Jurnal Pendidikan Unsika)* 6, no. 1 (2018): 23–28.

⁹ Subhan Zein, "English, Multilingualism and Globalisation in Indonesia: A Love Triangle: Why Indonesia Should Move towards Multilingual Education," *English Today* 35, no. 1 (2019): 48–53.

¹⁰ Ichda Farida Nisa, "Kebijakan Dan Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris Untuk SD Di Indonesia,," 2020.

per week.¹¹ With the KTSP, almost all elementary schools in Indonesia include English as local content even though at first English was only taught in grades IV-VI, to be taught in all classes starting from grade I.

English in elementary schools changed in 2012 when the government planned to replace the KTSP to the 2013 curriculum. The 2013 curriculum prioritizes an equal and learner-centered education model to be more involved in the learning process. This curriculum prioritizes the right to independent learning but still upholds religious values, culture and national diversity.

Many experts argued about implementation of 2013 curriculum that basic education should focus more on the development of children's character through religious and cultural values that have become the norm in Indonesia. This view then changed the structure of basic education where before children should be emphasized more on teaching about the religious values and culture of the State before they were exposed to foreign cultures (English). In addition, many people think that learning a foreign language will make it possible to lose Bahasa Indonesia. Therefore; it is recommended that English should not be part of teaching in elementary schools.

Pojoksatu. Id. Jakarta Reported that Ikatan Guru Indonesia (IGI) suggests to remove English subjects in middle and high school. English subject are focused on conversation, not grammar. So that elementary school children are expected to be able to communicate in English since elementary school. Therefore, we should go through and discuss further on whether English taught earlier or late instructed language setting like Indonesia.

Young learners of English Language

1. *The Special Characteristics of young learners*

Children have their own personalities in learning language such as likes and dislikes, interest, individual cognitive style,¹² capabilities, and their strengths and weakness. Gardner's suggested eight multiple intelligences that everyone has. So that, there is no different between young and older learners. However, there are three special characteristic of young learner; growth, literacy and vulnerability.¹³

a. Cognitive, social and emotional and physical growth

Cognitive growth shows the obvious different between young and adult. A child progress from five to twelve years old. They have short attention, easily distracted by other people, they stop doing something if it

¹¹ Andini Cesare Ardaya, Salsa Annisa Rahmadani, and Fitri Alfarisy, "Penerapan Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris Berdasarkan Kebijakan Kurikulum 2013 Di Sekolah Dasar Negeri 155 Gresik," *Jurnal Pendidikan Indonesia* 3, no. 1 (2022): 25–33.

¹² M. Kholis Amrullah, "STRATEGI BELAJAR KOGNITIF UNTUK PEMBELAJARAN BAHASA ARAB," *Muhadasah: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab* 3, no. 1 (June 7, 2021): 43–59, <https://doi.org/10.51339/muhad.v3i1.290>.

¹³ TASNIM LUBIS, "Teaching Vocabulary through Story Telling for Young Learners," *Journal of Community Empowerment* 1, no. 1 (2020): 18–27.

is difficult and sometime they try doing the task to please the teacher. Children 5 to 7 years old learn from direct experience understand cause and effect and be able to count and organize information to remember it. They have difficulty in using language and understanding about grammar and discourse (meta-language). Children 7 to 11 years old, it is called the concrete operational stage of cognitive development, a critical turning point as it marks the beginning of logical or operational thinking, when the child starts working things out 'in the head'. They are able to start seeing from different points of view not only their own lives. And they are able to solve concrete lesson problems. Children 11 to 13, children begin to manipulate thoughts and ideas, enable to expand the understanding about cause and effect and also develop their sense of metaphor and also understand jokes.

Children develop their interest and understand relation to others and their role in a group, so they can works in team. Socially, at 5 to 12 years they are able to make friends, gain the confident and reduce independency and learn to be leader. At 5 to 7 years old they learn to be cooperative and take a part in small group. Children at 7 to 12 they be sociable and prefer to play with the same sex group. However, they should be help in learning social skill especially in new culture. Children with an outgoing personality easy to learn language, but if they have trauma by terrible event or changes, the will have difficulty in learning language.

In foreign language learning need to create real life environments for students and show them that they can solve the problem and encounter obstacles in learning.¹⁴ The students are a part of the process, not only with their minds, but also with their senses and emotions. Students' prior knowledge and habits are included in the process. Thus, teachers need to create and foster feelings of trust, respect, openness, excitement and curiosity so that students can learn.¹⁵

The physical growth of children grows and develops rapidly and their motor skill increased. At 5 to 7 years of age they like physical activities, they play noisily and aggressively and engage in fantasy and fun. At 9 to 12 years of age. In learning language physical activities needed to help students in completing the task, learning language-related response; pointing, moving, colouring, etc.

b. Literacy

The impotant thing that difference for young learners compared with older learners, is that the learning literacy skills and understandings at the same time as they learn their target learning (English). For foreign language learners, literacy knowledge from the first language is available to assist them to handle reading and writing in the language, though a different

¹⁴ Fitriah Fitriah, "LIFELONG LEARNING SEBAGAI RESPON ERA REVOLUSI INDUTRI 4.0," *An-Nahdhah* 14, no. 2 (2021): 87–111.

¹⁵ Vanessa De Wilde, Marc Brysbaert, and June Eyckmans, "Learning English through Out-of-School Exposure. Which Levels of Language Proficiency Are Attained and Which Types of Input Are Important?," *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 23, no. 1 (2020): 171–85.

script and can negate this advantage. There are literacy stage based on Puckett and Black, that cited from Penny McKay.¹⁶

Table : widely Held Expectations of Literacy Development (Puckett and Black)

5-7 years	7-9 years	9-11 years	11-13 years
Developing sense of writing and reading	Understanding and using writing and reading for special purposes	Expanding thinking readily through writing and reading	Continue to think readily through writing and reading
Combining drawing and writing to present ideas	Combining drawing and writing that present the meaning by itself	Increasing reading vocabulary	Increasing ability in silent reading and spending time in reading
Understanding that prints "tells" story	Developing vocabulary of sight words	Being able to self-correct error	Continue to increase the reading ability to fit the purpose
Be able to read slowly and deliberately	Developing the ability to read silently	Being able to read silently and comprehend the reading and increase the speed of reading	Having various interest in genre of reading
Substituting words than make sense while reading	Developing ability of read aloud fluently with expression	Being able to scan the text	Begin to understand that everyone may have same interpretation in different way

c. Vulnerability

Learners mostly are vulnerable to criticism and failure. Young learners require more attention. They have their own confidence, if they have support and love. They have heightened sensitively to praise, criticism, and approval and their self-esteem is strongly influenced by experiences at school. They need experiences to help them to succeed, to feel good about themselves. The experiences help them to maintain the enthusiasm and creativity. But, they feel worthless when they face small failure.

Age Factor in Learning Language

Behaviorism theory explained that young learners are able to learn many aspects of language when they are not presented with any linguistic model, Chomsky introduced Universal Grammar theory that people were born with a

¹⁶ Mona Evelyn Flognfeldt et al., "The Practice of Assessing Norwegian and English Language Proficiency in Multilingual Elementary School Classrooms in Norway," *Language Assessment Quarterly* 17, no. 5 (2020): 519–40.

language acquisition device that facilitates children to learn language without explicitly taught.

In natural situation many experts believe that age is one of important predictors in learning language. In early stage, the learners have good responding to language input. This ability is called "Critical Period Hypothesis" Ahmed stated that this period is biologically determined period of life when a language is acquired easily.¹⁷ Rocio and Silvia, in their research about early versus late start in learning Spanish as foreign language found that the students who started learning early were good in listening, speaking and writing and also have a high confidence in Spanish oral and literacy skills.¹⁸ This is in line with Ballester stated that Spanish 5 years old acquired English in an immersion bilingual context show sensitivity to grammatical contrast in their second language, she concluded that the young learners could potentially develop language property.¹⁹ Early childhood is the best stage in language acquisition, as children approach puberty, the nature of language and storage changes becoming less flexible,²⁰ young learner acquire native like fluency and cognitively easy as learning their first language. These findings showed that learning foreign language earlier is better, and many countries believed it, so they started giving second language subjects in elementary school.

In contrary, Linguist suggested foreign language is not considered learning naturally, the learners need high concentration. Thus, young learners should wait until their brain developed. Young learners and adult learners have different concentration level, the higher level the better learning different subject and difficulty of subject. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle in Natakorn Satienchayakorn stated that the 12-15 years old learners were the fastest learners in pronunciation, morphology, syntax and vocabulary in foreign language and the lowest learners were 3-5 years old learners.²¹ According to Munoz learning language is better in early stage should not be generalized in all language setting.²² Foreign language is not widely used as daily communication, so the learners need good quality and

¹⁷ Farhad Mazlum, "Is English the World's Lingua Franca or the Language of the Enemy? Choice and Age Factors in Foreign Language Policymaking in Iran," *Language Policy*, 2022, 1-30.

¹⁸ Thomas D Mitchell et al., "Degrees of Reasoning: Student Uptake of a Language-Focused Approach to Scaffolding Patterns of Logical Reasoning in the Case Analysis Genre," *TESOL Quarterly*, 2021.

¹⁹ Weifeng Han, "Chinese Multidialectal Child Learners' Acquisition of English at the Syntax-Semantics Interface," in *Universal Grammar and the Initial State of Second Language Learning* (Springer, 2020), 49-73.

²⁰ Anita Habók and Andrea Magyar, "Validation of a Self-Regulated Foreign Language Learning Strategy Questionnaire through Multidimensional Modelling," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 1388.

²¹ Natakorn Satienchayakorn, "Differing Views on the Age Factor in Foreign Language Learning," *REFlections* 21 (2016): 93-105.

²² Carmen Muñoz, "On How Age Affects Foreign Language Learning," *Advances in Research on Language Acquisition and Teaching*, 2010, 39-49.

big quantity in learning foreign language. Thus, the learners need to have good comprehensible input.

Comprehensible Input In Learning Foreign Language

Comprehensible input is an important thing and an additional focus on learning language for it cannot be separated from social interaction. This input enhances the learners in learning language in their community. The quality and quantity of comprehensible input in certain setting defines the effective language learning environment and learners' development, in other word the more comprehensible input gained the more effective learning achieved. Natural setting in learning foreign language confirms that the length of learning and teaching is a good predictor.²³ They found that young learners have good chance to be more successful in learning foreign language than adult learners because the young learners have longer time than adults'.

English in Indonesian education system where English is taught as local content in elementary school, and not all elementary schools choose English for that subject. While in junior high school and senior high school has quantity meeting limitation in learning English, it is only 2 meeting per week and its only 4 hours meeting. It indicates that quantity and quality of comprehensible input in the classroom or every level education is lack or reduced. Monuz in Kontu Nurcahyoko and Dwi Amalia Putri that to be fluent in learning English like natural language setting, it will take 10 years. It means that Indonesian learners need 25.000 hours in school to learn English. It seems that there is less possible to master English well only at school.

However, in the classroom setting, comprehensible input can be achieved by a good and active teaching and learning. Krashen characterizes a good teacher as someone who can make input comprehensible to a non-native speaker regardless of the level to competence in the target language. So, Indonesian English teachers should have started to provide comprehensible input for their English students in the classroom setting. Teacher should have competence to make the input comprehensible. The teachers as a role model in learning foreign learning, the students imitate the teachers, they accepted what the teacher taught and told them. Young learners of language tend to imitate the teacher or role models directly. Thus, the students pick more inputs the teachers.

In addition, Teacher can create the classroom like a natural setting with some attractive methods of learning and teaching considering the students characteristics; cognitive and physical growth, literacy and vulnerability. Elementary school learners (7-11 years of age) need concrete form in learning and also they need direct experience.²⁴ Young learners also expect to learn from what activities that the teacher set up for them and tend to expand the learning only if

²³ Yanyan Sun and Fei Gao, "An Investigation of the Influence of Intrinsic Motivation on Students' Intention to Use Mobile Devices in Language Learning," *Educational Technology Research and Development* 68, no. 3 (2020): 1181-98.

²⁴ Nanik Shobikah, "English Education for Early Childhood Learner," *At-Turats* 12, no. 1 (2018).

the teacher ask them to do. So, teaching and learning with the suitable methods and techniques make the students enjoy the process of learning without any demand to compete with each other. Damar, Gürsoy & Korkmaz in their research that was focused on the teacher trainers' view about the starting age for L2 learning and the appropriate methodology for Teaching English to young learners. It showed that EFL teacher trainers prefer language education to start at the first stage of primary school and even earlier during pre-school and emphasized the importance of appropriate methodology and assessment techniques that are in accordance with the cognitive, emotional, and physical development of children.²⁵

According to La Jeti, Henny and Siti Misra Susanti that at kindergarten and elementary school level students should be introduced basic English learning especially vocabulary and simple conversation using several strategies such as learning by habit, memorizing the vocabulary, learning through games, song and puzzles.²⁶ Furthermore, the teachers should create the teaching and learning process interesting and fun. Lisrohli Irawati found that Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) suggested to use to make classroom vivid and students became more interesting in learning English in the classroom.²⁷ And many other strategies in teaching and learning that can be used in the classroom.

Learning foreign language at school or instructed language setting mainly learn in classroom, as it said before that the only model is the teacher in that class. Lightbown and Spada argue that classroom learners learn more very formal and academic purposes language used than social setting.²⁸ Margana Suggested the application of Contextual Language instruction for young learners to facilitate them to acquire target language (English) that young learners be able to incorporate visual and reality, meaningful context and vivid example.²⁹ Thus, it does not mean that young learners are difficult to get the quality input. There are many ways, techniques and methods that can be applied in learning foreign language and it is applicable in daily life.

Conclusion

Curriculum 2013 (K-13) changes the structure of basic education where children should be emphasized more on teaching about the religious values and

²⁵ Ebru Damar, Esim Gürsoy, and Şule Çelik Korkmaz, "Teaching English to Young Learners: Through the Eyes of EFL Teacher Trainers," *ELT Research Journal* 2, no. 3 (2013): 95–110.

²⁶ La Jeti, Henny Henny, and Siti Misra Susanti, "INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION," *Yaa Bunayya: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini* 2, no. 2 (2018): 63–78.

²⁷ Iisrohli Irawati et al., "The Use of Contextual Teaching and Learning in Writing Subjects: A Case Study of the Second Year Students at SDN 3 Bareng Lor Klaten in 2013/2014," *Register Journal* 7 (2008).

²⁸ Patsy M Lightbown and Nina Spada, "Teaching and Learning L2 in the Classroom: It's about Time," *Language Teaching* 53, no. 4 (2020): 422–32.

²⁹ Athanasios KARASIMOS, "The Battle of Language Learning Apps: A Cross-Platform Overview," *Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning* 12, no. 1 (2022).

culture of the state before they were exposed to foreign language. English is not recommended to be taught elementary schools. This made a controversial issue among teachers.

This paper shows the age effect on the learning foreign language. Some studies found that learning English is better to be learnt from early age than late stage because the young learners have good responding to language input. This ability is called "Critical Period Hypothesis". Age definitely affects the language learning success. However, it cannot be reached without considering the young's characteristics and the ability of learners in their comprehensible input.

Indonesia government should consider to revitalize the policy on teaching and learning English and provide more the study hours in learning English at school. And the teacher always struggle to improve the teaching and learning by creating the activities like the real environment which can build students input and metacognitive awareness in learning English.

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