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ISSUES OF TEYL IN INDONESIAN AND WHAT PARENT CAN DO ABOUT IT

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Abstract

In Indonesia preschools with English-only or bilingual approaches have increasingly established and gained popularity among parents and children. To parents who favors TEYL, teaching English since early age is believed to be more effective as children's brains are believed to absorb language easily. The mastery of English is also perceived to be a valuable investment for the child's future. However, some people view TEYL in Indonesia with a more critical eye. This is especially because TEYL starts as early as two years old when the young learners' mother tongue, Indonesian, has not been acquired fully. As a result, many are worried if the acquisition of English would sacrifice the acquisition and quality of Indonesian, the nation lingua franca. The purpose of this paper is to raise parent's awareness on the issues underlying the teaching of English to young learners. It aims to critically examine studies on early multilingualism in countries where English is the first language and compare them with Indonesia's condition where English remains a foreign language. The paper starts with the narrative of Ben, my 22 month-old son, and his unique linguistic repertoire to illustrate the uniqueness and individuality of the linguistic landscape each young learner brings into classroom. After a brief introduction sharing the story of Ben, I look more closely at the issues of teachingEnglish to young learners. The paper concludes by suggesting reflective parenting approach to address the pervasive practice of TEYL in Indonesia and pose a number of issues to consider when immersing one's child in English.

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INTRODUCTION

This article was prompted by my condition as a mother of a 22-month old boy, Ben. Ben was born in the US when I was completing my Ph.D. in Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Although he was born in an English monolingual country, he was a simultaneous trilingual with English, Indonesian and Mandarin. My husband, Kean, spoke with him in English, my parents-in-law in Mandarin, while I in Indonesian.

After completing my Ph.D., we went back to Indonesia. Ben was a year at that time. In Indonesia, we lived in a small town in Central Java, Salatiga. Salatiga was a multilingualtown with Javanese and Indonesian as the predominant languages. In Salatiga, Ben's language socialization patterns were naturally changed. He was exposed to Indonesian and Javanese on a daily basis. He uttered his first word when he was twenty month old. The majority of his first words were Indonesian such as '*kakak*' (from the song '*burungkakatua'* that I often sang to him), '*bis'* (a bus) '*ini*' (this), and '*mau*' (want) and a word in Javanese, which is, '*emoh*' ('No way' in Javanese). Since I always reprimanded him using an English word 'no' since he was born, the word 'no' is also part of his multilingual repertoire. In fact, it was more effective reprimanding him using 'no' than the Indonesian's '*jangan*' (also means 'no' in Bahasa Indonesia).

Due to the changing of Ben's linguistic environment in Indonesia, language inputs had always been my constant concern. In the US, I consciously spoke to him in Indonesian because I expected him to grow up knowing Indonesian. As he wasalso half-chinese, I also wanted him to speak Mandarin, whose major source of inputs were my in-laws. In the US, speaking English was never my concern since he was living in English-speaking contexts. On a daily basis, he was exposed to English through TVs and the communication between my husband and me. When he was in Indonesia, the Mandarin inputs he had been exposed to since birth were suddenly absent. The English inputs were also reduced to the daily conversation between Kean and me through Skype. As a result, he barely produced any English and Mandarin.

Given the complexity of Ben's linguistic landscape, I faced a major dilemma. I could have spoken with him entirely in English to maintain his English competence. However, by socializing Ben exclusively in English, I would 'sacrifice' our Indonesian relationship which I had been building

since he was born. An important dimension of language is the emotion it holds (Pavlenko, 2005) and the kinds of identities it constructs (Nunan & Choi, 2010). For me, it is important for Ben to grow up with an understanding and appreciation of Indonesian values and assume somewhat Indonesian identities, which are maintained and constructed through Indonesian language. If I had socialized entirely in English with him, I was afraid our emerging 'Indonesian' relationship and bond would have been lost.

Norton (2001) points out that language choice strongly correlates with future imagination. 'Future imagination' here means "a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future" (Norton, 2010, p. 355). In teaching English to young learners, the concept of 'future imagination' needs to be understood differently. If Norton (1997; 2001; 2010) refers to future imagination as future projections owned by *the language learners*, in TEYL, the 'future imagination' is owned predominantly by the *parents.* Perhaps, this is the reason why studies on TEYL largely focus on studying the parents' imagination in immersing one child in English preschools (see, among others, Djiwandono, 2005; Lao, 2004; Oladejo, 2006; Shang, Ingebritson, & Tseng, 2010).

Realizing that Ben's long-term goal is living in the US has also contributed to my continued use of Indonesian. I believe he can later acquire English from the US community. As a future imagined community also assumes "imagined identities" (Norton, 2010), I expect Ben to maintain his Indonesia-ness or Asian-ness when he will later move to the US. I strongly subscribe to the view that strong competence in Indonesian will lead to solid projections of Indonesian identities and values.

Now that he is nearing a preschool age another question looms large: What kind of preschool do I want Ben to be socialized into? Being a novice in the TEYL and a mom of a 22-month old, Ben is a driving force for me to write this paper. This paper is my first attempt to accommodate my initial, yet growing, understanding and curiosity of the TEYL in Indonesian contexts.

ORGANIZATION

The paper starts with the most-cited age reason of early English immersion and how the 'age' argument is relevant in Indonesian settings where English remains a foreign language. Then, I review four issues surrounding the teaching of English, i.e. issues of the quality of English inputs, issues of multilingual competence,issues of teaching quality, and, most importantly, issues of national identities. This paper argues that the purpose of TEYL in Indonesia needs to be reconceptualized into the

teaching of *multilingual* young learners (hereafter, TEMYL). Finally, the paper ends with the introduction to a reflexive parental approach so that parents can play a more active role in the complexities of TEYL.

THE AGE FACTOR FOR EARLY ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH

The most cited reason for early English acquisition might be age. There is a widely held belief that age positively correlates with the success of second language acquisition. Many immigrant narratives might shape up this belief. Most of us have heard or been told stories of immigrant parents who struggle with learning English while their children effortlessly "pick up" the language. Youmight also have met adult immigrants who speak accented English after years of living in an English-speaking country while their children speak English without a trace of an accent after having been in an English-speaking environment for a relatively short time.

This widely held belief is also supported empirically. Studies on first language acquisition has found that each child is believed to be endowed with "language instinct" (Lennerberg, 1967) or "Language Acquisition Device" or LAD (Chomsky, 1959) to acquire their mother tongue. Both Lennerberg and Chomsky strongly believe that all children have the innate ability to learn a language. Provided a child is exposed to a language, a normally developing child will start to speak his/her mother tongue. Examined in the light of Lennerberg's and Chomsky's theories, children are good language learners because they are "genetically predisposition for language learning" (Gordon, 2007, p. 45). In other words, children learn language easily because it is part of their natural development.

Some scholars argue that LAD or language instinct works the same way as a child is learning a second language provided that it is stimulated by appropriate sociocultural contexts where the language sits. Then, what sociocultural conditions should be met for the language instinct to function?Gordon (2007) writes in immigrant contexts where immigrant children are surrounded by the 'mother tongue' speakers of the second language, children's second language learning may develop similar to first language learning. Similarly, Wang (2008) who successfully raises trilingual children with English, Chinese, French also points the importance of quality of inputs to the success of language acquisition. From Gordon's (2007) and Wang's (2008) studies, it can be learned that for the language instincts to function optimally in second language acquisition, two conditions need to be met. First, children need to be exposed to the second language as much as to their mother tongue. Second, the (second language) input needs to come from the mother tongue speakers of the second language. Given that these

two conditions are not meet, it remains questionable if the children's second language learning will be successful.

TEACHING ENGLISH TO MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

Issues of Quality of English Inputs

In the contexts where societal English inputs are lacking quantitatively and qualitatively, such as in Indonesia, the role of teachers as, perhaps, the sole providers of English inputs become even more crucial. Although studies show a positive correlation between 'mother tongue' quality of inputs and children's success in acquiring a second language, I do not take this to mean that the best teacher for children would be the so-called 'native speakers,' although it does points to the need to pay serious attention to the English competence and fluency of young learners English teachers. Here, I use the term 'competence' following Pavlenko (2005) to mean "the unconscious knowledge a speaker has of the linguistic, sociolinguistic, and communicative principles that allow the interpretation and use of a particular language" (p.6). To this end, perhaps immersing a child in English-only preschool might be necessary. This is because English-only preschool gives a much-needed English exposure and provides a site for English-use. Hence, English-only preschool might help in filling the gap of the lack of quantitative English input in Indonesia.

However, for the success of second language acquisition, exclusive focus on quantitative English inputs might not be sufficient. Wang's (2008) study clearly warns that in situation where societal linguistic inputs are lacking, the quality of inputs, then, should become the primary focus. For this reason, teachers of young learners need to pay specifically on the quality of English inputs they expose and teach their young learners. This is even crucial because, perhaps, it is from theirteachers these children hear English for the first time. Hence, this early exposure of English might lay significant foundation for the children multilingual English development.

Issues of Multilingual Competence

There have been many influential educationists who attempt to conceptualize children's learning process metaphorically. One of these educationists is John Locke. He describes that children are born as 'blank slates' with no knowledge. They start acquiring knowledge from birth passively and from time to time begin to actively process links between those knowledge. Although there has not been any conclusive evidence to date on the one on one correlation between the quality of inputs and

output,John Locke's view certainly reinforces the significance of parental and educational inputs in forming the first images placed on the 'blank slates' of the children brain.

Although Locke's tenet does have pedagogical values, multilingual children certainly do not come to their classroom as blank slates. They are not 'culture-less' or 'language-less' beings with regards to language and culture. In fact, young learners in Indonesia, perhaps, have been exposed to languages and cultures other than English. However, it is interesting to see how the teaching of English to young learners most often treats children as 'blank slates.' In English-only pre-schools, for example, the place of children's mother and national tongues are somehow 'blanked out'. This can also be seen from the term 'Teaching English to young learners,' a pervasive term used in Indonesia as far as English teaching to young learners is concerned.

Considering the multilingual nature of English young learners in Indonesia, I, therefore, would like to propose the term 'Teaching English to multilingual young learners.' I insert the term 'multilingual' to reconceptualize the purpose of TEYL in Indonesia, that is, to celebrate and cultivate the multilingual-ness of Indonesian young learners because of the benefits of multilingualism over monolingualism (see, for example, Edwards & Dewaele, 2007; Gordon, 2007; Harding-Esch & Riley, 2003; Wang, 2008; Weatherford, 2000). Implied in the suggestion is the belief that learning English does not mean giving up one's first language. Rather, English should enrich one's multilingual repertoire.

Issues of Teaching Quality

One of the critiques of early English acquisition was the teaching quality of teachers (Shang et al., 2010). Teachers of young learners were commented as lacking the necessary teaching skills and knowledge to teach. A study conducted by Suyanto (2003 cited in Sutrisno, 2004) found that more than 70% of 700 teachers participating in regional workshop and in-service training in TEYL did not have any English education background. Her study also illustrated the lack of necessary teaching techniques, including employing glaring grammatical and pronunciation mistakes in language instruction. The teachers in the study also selected inappropriate instruction materials for the teaching of young learners.

In Indonesian context specifically, concern over teaching quality is imperative. Manypeople falsely assume that the teaching of English to young learners might be less demanding linguistically compared to adults. Perhaps, this is the reasons why in Indonesia, the teachers of young learners are most often recruited from English [teaching] Department which orients

toward teaching English to adults. The underlying assumption might be teachers who are qualified to teach English to adults were automatically deemed to be qualified to teachyoung learners. Although this assumption has largely been challenged (see, among others, Abe, 1991; Cameron, 2001), this common belief still remains. Seeing in this light, Suyanto's findings are not surprising considering TEYL is not considered as a separate field of study although education in TEYL or PAUD (*Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*) has already started toemerge. However, to what extent has PAUD accommodated the need of TEYL, most importantly, multilingual young learners, needs to be further explored and studied.

Issues of National Identities

One of the concerns of TEYL, if not the most significant, is the role of English to the construction of national identities. Many Indonesians have expressed concerns over the extent to which enthusiasm to learn and speak English might contribute negatively to national identities. Pramono(2009), for example, strongly argues that speaking *Bahasa Indonesia* with English-accent or code-mixing *Bahasa Indones*ia and English, or "Indoglish" (*Bahasa Indonesia*-English) is symptomatic to the deterioration of nationalism. Good Indonesians, he believed, are those who speak *Bahasa Indonesia* in a correct and right manner (*Berbahasa Indonesia yang baik dan benar*), which implies free from English accent and English-Indonesia mixed words. Pramono's concerns are also shared by Onishi (2010). Onishi's (July 25, 2010) observation, for example, indicates that some upper-middle class parents take pride if their children can speak English fluently even though their competence in *Bahasa Indonesia* is questionable. Therefore, Onishi describes the condition of *Bahasa Indonesia* as "increasingly under threat" (p.1).

Interestingly, researchers find that mixing language may actually reflect multilingual's cognitive, communicative and social competence (see, for example, Edwards & Dewaele, 2007; Genesee, 2006; Ritchie & Bhatia, 2006; Stavans, 1992; Stavans & Swisher, 2006). From a linguistic point of view, Wang (2008) explains that mixing is considered a typical phenomenon when more than one language are involved. Despite the naturalness of mixing from a linguistic standpoint, Pramono's and Onishi's views are good examples of how one's language mediates social identity and, in this case, national identities.

The concerns of national identities might be justified. In a country with hundreds of local languages, a strong lingua franca, *Bahasa Indonesia*, is crucial to unify the hundreds of ethnic groups and local languages. The concern is even more valid considering Indonesian parents, at least seen

from Djiwandono's(2005) study, do not seem to see the mastery of Indonesian as needing special attention. In fact, they do not seem to worry if early English acquisition may hamper the acquisition of *Bahasa Indonesia* and other local languages. From Djiwandono's study, several important conclusions can be drawn. First, parent's concern of children's future might instrumentally motivate them to focus exclusively on the children's English competence over the mastery of *Bahasa Indonesia*, the national tongue. Second, the finding might indicate the pervasive belief that the competence of Indonesian will develop naturally simply because it is the lingua franca of the country and among Indonesians.

Despite the belief of naturalistic language acquisition might be commonsensical and, for some, might be deemed more effective (Krashen, Long, &Scarcella, 1979), Walqui(2000) asserts that there is a positive correlation between the status of a language and the sustainability of that language. A learner whose mother tongue is considered a low status, despite its pervasive use in the community, has the potential to loose it because they are conditioned to "give up their own linguistic and cultural background to join the more prestigious society associated with the target language" (p.1). Thus, English educators need to constantly be aware and question how *Bahasa Indonesia* and other local languages are constructed and represented vis-à-vis English when teaching English to multilingual young learners.

Another interesting yet necessary point that can be learned from Pramono's and Onishi's strong concerns is the view of national identities as static and unified. Pramono's and Onishi's views might be justified when English has not acquired its global status. However, in this modern world, identities, including national identities, are continuously constructed, co-constructed, negotiated, and transformed on on-going basis through and by language (Hall, 1996; Norton, 1997). English, as the world language, certainly is a major force in the construction of national identities. The view that good Indonesian nationals need to speak '*Bahasa Indonesia* in a correct way and manner' also does not accommodate the creation of social space for the construction of a multimembership within Indonesian national identities. There is a need to rethink how to conceptualize more dynamic national identities in a multicultural and multilingual Indonesian society. Most significantly, there is an immediate need for closer collaboration of all parties concerning with cultivating happy and healthy growth of multilingual Indonesian young learners within a dynamic and pervasive use of English in the world.

Reflective Parenting Approach in Teaching English to Multilingual Young Learners

Making a language choice on behalf of their children is an important and complex decision for many parents. Thus, parents often rely, some even trust wholeheartedly, on teachers and professionals for guidance and supports. Due to the scarcity of studies on the effectiveness of TEYL in Indonesia, unfortunately, many teachers and professionals are not well-informed in multilingual language acquisition and related matters. I have found that many parents do not need to be told how to raise multilingual children. Rather, I want to help them to reflect on their own multilingual realities and practices, decision-making and as well as concerns by suggesting several reflective focuses (hereafter, reflective parenting approach). What follow are some strategies to be a reflective parent drawn from my own experience coupled with sources on the field of multilingual development.

Asking So Many 'Why's

In Indonesia, the average age of teaching and learning English is declining almost every year. Most parents seek English schools to expose their children to English as early as possible. Despite the popularity of bilingual or English-only schools, the effectiveness of exposing English in such an early age remains sketchy. To the best of my knowledge, longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of early acquisition of English in Indonesia are lacking, if not non-existent. Thus, it is safe to assume that theories and pedagogical foundations on TEYL in Indonesia are most often drawn from English-speaking countries where bilingualism with English has been vastly studied. While drawing pedagogical foundations from these countries might be useful, it needs to be noted that the English linguistic ecology, that is "the social environment in which a language is spoken" (Yip & Matthews, 2007, p. 8), in these English-speaking countries are significantly different from Indonesia, where English remains a foreign language.

In situationas such, parents, as the sole decision-making in children's language development, need to engage in critical reflection of why they want to expose their children to English early on. Asking so many 'why's early on before immersing one child in a pre-school, be it English-only, bilingual, or even Indonesian-only, will lead to a more informed decision-making process. This might be the best contribution you can give to your child's multilingual development. As Harding-Ersch and Riley notes, "When all is said and done, the decision is yours. Or at least, it should be; don't let

outsiders, whether family or "authorities," push you around. Remember, you know best…" (Harding-Esch & Riley, 2003, p. 87).

Understanding and Evaluating Your Linguistic Reality

Once you have engaged with the many 'why's dialog, you need to understand and evaluate your children's linguistic reality and what you, as the parents, can bring into the picture. Some people might wonder why I start the paper sharing the narrative of Ben instead of citing experts as many academic papers do. The narrative indeed is meant to provide an example of the "dialogizing" process I have been engaged in to understand and evaluate the linguistic reality of Ben as well as making me aware of my own assumptions and imaginations when exposing and communicating through languages to Ben. This process helps me identify the risks and benefits of early English acquisition. The narrative of Ben also shows that the decision-making to expose one child to English is not only a linguistic decision but most importantly also a question of identity. Parents need to ask themselves the kind of identities they want to project to their children with an early exposure to English.

Be Open Minded and Courageous for a Change

Last but not least, be open-minded to change. As the effectiveness of early exposure to English has not been proven effective in Indonesian contexts as mentioned earlier, you need to constantly evaluate and be well-informed of your children multilingual development. This includes being open to change your initial decision if it is not suitable and healthy for your child's multilingual development and emotional well-being.

I remembered there were times when my husband and I needed to adjust our initial decision even if it meant to go against theories. As Ben acquired more Indonesian and Javanese, the language divides between him and Kean grew wider. Kean who only spoke a very little Bahasa Indonesia and visited us every four months had difficulties in bonding with Ben. Each time he spoke with him in English, Ben responded with strange and bewildered looks. As language created a "sense of belonging" (Nunan& Choi, 2010) and affections (Pavlenko, 2005), Ben failed to bond with his daddy. For this reasons, our initial intention to socialize Ben with English through "one parent, one language approach" or OPOL (Genesee, Nicoladis, & Paradis, 1995) with Kean exposing him to English and me to Indonesian needed to be immediately adjusted. In his broken Indonesian, my husband tried to communicate with Ben, which Ben seemed to eagerly respond.

Although passive, Ben continued to be exposed to English because my husband and I communicated entirely in English.

Although OPOL approach might be the best method to develop a child's bilingualism, you need to monitor how this approach works in your own linguistic realities. It needs to be noted that many theories in bilingualism, including OPOL, are developed in immigrant contexts that have significantly different linguistic landscapes from Indonesia. The above narrative underlines the importance of parental authorities in observing and evaluating your child's linguistic realities and development.

CLOSING REMARKS

In this paper, I have reviewed the issues that parents need to reflect upon when immersing their children in English-only or bilingual preschools. The goal of the paper is not to propose "the best preschool" for bilingual development and/or English development. Due to the increase interest in TEYL in Indonesia, studies focusing on the effectiveness of this early exposure to English need to be seriously encouraged. As we live in Indonesia, issues of national identities within TEYL also need to be considered and taken into account. Teachers of young learners need to be critical on how they represent English vis-à-vis other languages so that English can be an additional language that adds on to the linguistic repertoire of the multilingual young learners. Finally, through reflective parental approach, this paper encourages parents to be an active agent in monitoring and exploring their own children's multilingual language development.Parents need to be aware that exposing children to language(s), either through home or educational institutions, is not a matter of linguistic decision per se. Rather, learning languages provides sites of identity construction (Norton, 1997, 2010). Through reflective parental approach, I hope parent can make a more informed decision that works best for one's own children.

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