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JOURNAL OF MULTIPERSPECTIVE EDUCATION

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## **New Insights into Teaching of English Language to Indonesian Students**

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### **Bio Data:**

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### **Abstrak**

Seiring dengan perkembangan dunia, bahasa Inggris telah mendapatkan status sebagai bahasa internasional yang wajib dipelajari di hampir semua negara di dunia. Di Indonesia, walaupun status bahasa Inggris masih sebagai bahasa asing, pengajaran bahasa Inggris telah dimulai sejak puluhan tahun yang lalu. Berbagai metodologi pengajaran bahasa Inggris telah diterapkan di Indonesia untuk mencapai kompetensi berbahasa Inggris. Akan tetapi hasil yang didapatkan hampir selalu jauh dari harapan. Pengajaran bahasa Inggris selama bertahun-tahun jarang menghasilkan lulusan yang kompeten dalam berbahasa Inggris. Berangkat dari masalah tersebut, tulisan ini ingin mengungkapkan faktor-faktor penyebab rendahnya penguasaan bahasa Inggris di Indonesia secara eksploratif. Dengan menganalisa studi-studi terdahulu beserta fakta-fakta yang ada, ditemukan bahwa karakteristik pelajar yang cenderung pasif karena faktor kultur Indonesia, kualitas guru yang di bawah

standar, lingkungan dan kurikulum menjadi kendala utama dalam pencapaian kompetensi berbahasa Inggris. Selanjutnya dielaborasi suatu konsep atau strategi pengajaran bahasa Inggris ideal yang sesuai dengan konteks dan kultur Indonesia dengan penekanan pada pengajaran bahasa Inggris yang berbasis budaya lokal dan memaksimalkan metode komunikatif dengan target dan tujuan pencapaian kompetensi berbahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa komunikasi global. Konsep tersebut bisa terlaksana dengan adanya guru yang berkualitas yang benar-benar memahami tujuan pengajaran bahasa Inggris di Indonesia.

**Keywords:** *Pengajaran bahasa Inggris, karakteristik pelajar, kualitas guru, keahlian komunikasi*

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## Introduction

There was an apprehensive conversation happened between an English teacher and a student of an Indonesian high school told in a 2004 *Kompas* article. The student asked the teacher, "We have been studying the English language for almost six years now, when will we be speaking and using English?", (Lie, 2004). This question is really impressed those who are concerned about English language teaching as nobody can guarantee students' mastery of English without maximum exposure to the language itself. In fact, the student's feeling is similar to what many other students also felt before graduating from an Indonesian high school or university. They have studied English for three years at junior high school, then three more years at senior high school, and they often had some English classes during their undergraduate period. However, only few of them who could speak English when graduated although it is often inadequate for use in regular communication. What those students might know well were tenses, irregular verbs and other grammatical trivia.

Indonesia has become one of the expanding circle countries where English is widely studied as a foreign language (McKay, 2002). Despite its importance, the language does not have an official status in Indonesia; say as a second language such the status of English in countries like Singapore, the Philippine, and India. Previously, the Indonesian government, with supports from the Ford Foundation, RELO (Regional English Language Office), and the British Council, has decided that English is the first foreign language to be taught at schools. Afterwards, English is used primarily as an object of study, a compulsory subject, in a pedagogical domain, the objective of which to attain native-like proficiency. English is also not used as part of the Indonesians' linguistic repertoire. The textbooks used in teaching English in Indonesian schools are also written and composed by local experts.

Yet after many years elapsed, Lee (2004) states that most Indonesian schools are still facing difficulties in terms of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, even though some approaches have been implemented in the public school's curriculum, such as grammar-translation (1945), oral (1968), audio-lingual (1975) and communicative language teaching methods (1984 and 1994).

Therefore, in this article some questions were raised relative to the teaching of English language in the Indonesian context. 1) What are the current problems of teaching English language in Indonesia?, 2) What are the current English teaching methodology and what should be undertaken for improvement?, 3) What are applicable English language teaching strategies to help the Indonesian learners?

In order to figure out the answers of the aforementioned questions, some previous studies and literatures were explored and reviewed, in particular previous studies related to the teaching of English language in Asia and Indonesia. Finally, it is expected from this article that a strategy, or at least a concept, to improve the teaching of English as a foreign language in the Indonesian context can be constructed.

### **Constraint in Teaching English and Learners' Characteristics**

Generally speaking, Teaching English as A Foreign Language is visible in many countries such as Germany, Thailand, and Japan, where it is spoken by limited number of population. This language is widely visible in the area of entertainment, movies, television, video, music, internet, media and information technology. Sjöholm, (2004) asserts that English has become the dominant language in a large number of domains such as commerce, industry, sport, youth culture, tourism, and especially advertisement. Moreover, a command of English is very important for anyone involves in the scientific discussion, uses the computer and the internet.

Since English has become the first official foreign language in Indonesia, teaching the English language for students starts from junior high schools (Grade 7-9) for four hours per week, by focusing on aural skills as the foundation. Meanwhile, in senior high schools, (Grade 10-12), students learn English for three to seven hours per week. The national curriculum's objectives for English at this level include emphasizing students to master 4000 vocabulary by the time they graduate from senior high schools, (Lowenberg, 1991).

According to Y.M. Harsono, (2006), in Indonesia, English language functions (1) to help the development of the state and nation, (2) to build relations with other nations, and (3) to run foreign policy. In relation to that, English Language Teaching in Indonesia has been carried out as early as the Dutch period, before the World War II, starting to be taught in Junior High School

called MULO (Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs) or extended elementary school. In the recent development of English Language Teaching in Indonesia, English has been taught in the elementary school as an elective subject since the implementation of the 1994 Curriculum. In the development of English Language Teaching in Indonesia, there are a lot of problems ranging from the context of learning, the objective of teaching, English Language Teaching in the primary school, the method of teaching, and logistic problems.

English has been taught for so many hours and become part of high school's six-year curriculum. Ironically, there are still very limited numbers of students who are able, for instance, to read a simple English book. Many English learners were cramming all of these grammatical rules over night before the final examination, and then they forgot everything afterward.

Since Indonesia does not belong to *inner circle* or *outer circle* countries<sup>1</sup>, students do not have many opportunities to listen and speak English. Exposure to English can be said very low since families do not speak English at homes and English is not used as a communication means in the offices, at station, at post office and at other public spheres. Hence, the only place where English has the status is in English classroom. However, the extensive use of native language or Bahasa Indonesia in English classroom by teachers and English language learners somehow does not facilitate the acquisition of English language. This will make students miss the opportunity to listen to some English and miss their most valuable time to practice English with their teachers and peers.

Lowenberg, (1991) explains some factors that might contribute to the problem of low level of English proficiency faced by students graduated from senior high schools. The first factor is that the problem relies within the Indonesian educational system itself. The second one is Indonesian classroom situation which is still generally overcrowded and noisy. The third factor is that there are many teachers who are still lacking of proficiency in English or still need some training in language pedagogy. And the fourth factor is the inadequacy of their salary to support their family which also contributed the complexity of the problem. Meanwhile, the best teachers; often decide to leave the schools for a better job.

<sup>1</sup> These terms were coined by Braj Kachru. The term Inner Circle Countries describes countries that are English speaking, and the term Outer Circle Countries describes countries in which English has a long history and high status such as India, Singapore and the Philippine. See McKay, (2002, p. 9).

In fact, one of the crucial problems as described above by Lowenberg could be observed in Banda Aceh, Indonesia in the last four years. After the earthquake and tsunami disaster that struck the region on December 26, 2004, many international organizations came to Aceh providing humanitarian aids and then established their offices in the city. They announced many positions with a higher salary compared to the average Indonesian wage. This situation has triggered many proficient English teachers to leave their students for the better jobs. The remaining teachers at the schools, at that time, were those who lack of English speaking skill, albeit they seemed very good in English grammar.

In line with the third factors explained by Lowenberg above, Dormer (2007) states that Indonesia is currently lacking of qualified English teachers, hence schools often use teachers with very limited English skills. This made the textbook as the only English language learning source in the classroom. It is certain that if the language is learned only from the textbook, the students will simply master reading and writing skills while they lack of speaking and listening. However, the real challenge and drawback in the classroom is when the teacher does not speak English and fails to bring the students in communicative atmosphere.

In addition to factors above, the Indonesian learners' characteristic is also a crucial issue in teaching the English language to them. Through the interview with five Australian teachers who have taught English as a Foreign Language in a village area of Central Java for ten months in 1990s, Exley, (2005) explores deeply about Indonesian English students' learner characteristic. According to the teachers, it is common that Indonesian students are passive, shy and quite due to their cultural, institutional and behavioral background. The teachers argued that these characteristics contributed to students' low level in English language proficiency.

Moreover, Lewis, (as cited in Exley, 2005) reports from his study that Indonesian students learning the English language are mostly silent, occasionally completing pronunciation drills or responding to teachers' question on the readings or grammar tasks. Major activities in the classroom are copying from the blackboard and translating texts or vocabulary from English to Indonesian. Lewis also finds most English language teachers in Indonesia still prefer the traditional model of grammar-translation and direct

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method although the new English curriculum from the Indonesian Ministry of National Education has adapted a semi-communicative methodology.

Another important study about Indonesian learners characteristic was conducted by Sri Lengkanawati Nenden, (2004). She undertook a research with around 114 English language learners in one of Indonesian universities. Her findings indicate that the intensity of using memory strategies by English language students is high. For many years, Indonesian students have the habit of rote learning behavior. This behavior has become the cultural habit in studying. In addition, the intensity of using the strategies-cooperating with peers or with proficient user of the target language is low among Indonesian students. She argued that most Indonesian students are shy to show that they do not know something. In the classroom, even though students do not understand what the teachers say, very few students are willing to admit by asking questions.

Based on those studies, it is clear that the obstacles in teaching English as Foreign Language to Indonesian students vary from the English language curriculum itself, classroom situation, teaching and learning styles, and learners' characteristics to teacher's own problem. In the following section, current English language teaching methods applied in Indonesia and what could be done to improve this situation in classroom will be explored.

### **Thinking Teaching English Language in Indonesian Context; Current English Language Teaching Method and Way of Teaching**

Every serious learner of foreign languages always expects from the beginning that after a period of time, they will be able to communicate in a foreign language. Likewise, English learners in Indonesia also expect similar target that after six years of learning they will be able to speak English or at least to survive with some English abilities.

There are many cases happen where students' expectations often do not match with the reality of learning results showing that their English proficiency is still very low or no significant English ability is achieved after many years of study. This low achievement might be a starting point to look back to what has happened to the teaching of English in the Indonesian context, both the methods and the learners.

As of for the methodology used in English teaching, Lie mentions that the English language teaching methods used in Indonesian public schools



still focus on accuracy, although since 1984 and 1994 the communicative language teaching (CLT) has been approached by the Indonesian government as the way English language should be taught in the national curriculum. The government also later adopted the competency-based curriculum in English language teaching. The teaching seems still to be in the old way since these new approaches are not clear enough to teachers. Moreover, teachers rarely receive adequate English language training and they also often have to teach in grammar, which invariably do not make the students being able to speak, listen, read and write in the English language.

Furthermore, hiring teachers who are capable to apply the current English teaching methodology in classroom is not easy, especially for schools located in rural area. According to Chodidjah, (2007), Schools located in urban and wealthier areas usually have the ability to hire more English teachers due to parents' support. Some schools just employ university students who can speak English because of lower rate payment whilst some others assign their permanent teachers who have better English or have an English background. Meanwhile, the English language teacher training set up by the regional Education and Training Center is mainly for those permanent teachers registered as civil servants. Most of the trainees are class teachers or special subject teachers who speak only a little English.

On the other hand, the lack of English teaching methodology application in classroom is difficult to improve due to current teachers' recruitment system which is far from ideal. The recruitment system still involves the Primary Education Office. It is often that the dissemination of vacancy information for English teachers does not reach the right mix of participants. Sometimes a group from an area dominate simply because the 'relationship.' It is also more of 'favor' or 'just-easy-to-call' principle than proper identification of candidates based on their English language capability. It seems that the coordination among the supposedly involved institutions is not well enough. Later, despite their successful in the training and some of them are capable of teaching, they still have problems with their school principals or supervisors who have inadequacy knowledge about how language is supposedly to be taught since they still believe in conventional classroom delivery where teachers are actively teaching the students in a teacher-controlled classroom, (Chodidjah, 2004).

In addition, Dormer, (2007) contends that schools rarely have adequate funding or appropriate staff to carry out testing or oral language skills. This situation does not mean that oral language skills should not be taught. The bigger challenge is the fact that some tests have been found to actually contain language errors.

### *Expectations from Classroom*

Frankly, what really should be done to English language learners in classroom's teaching-learning process is still need to be explored further. Before elaborating some key points that should be applied in the Indonesian context, it is much worth to see English language learners from some other countries across Asia for a comparison with Indonesia.

In Japan, Davies, (2006) undertook a study about what English language learners' expect from their classroom at Aichi Shukutoku University in Nagoya. He collected data from students by using class-specific questionnaire survey. The learners' responses encouraged him to change key elements in his course, such as syllabus type, skills focus and task type. In short, some actions have been taken in response to English language learners' expectations that will take to a more cohesive long-term course development such as putting tasks as the main organizing principle, emphasizing some interactional tasks, and including more listening and vocabulary-building tasks.

Davies then made some crucial points where he suggested that English language teachers must increase learner-centeredness such as negotiating course content and encouraging student participation. English language teachers also must pay attention to more effective task or material selection as well as the design. The last things he suggested is the teacher self-development in which teachers should develop their knowledge and skills related to materials' design.

Back to Indonesia, Djamiah Husain, (as cited in Exley, 2005) carried out the study to 31 English students in Makassar State University, Indonesia. She reports that English language learners differ in a wide variety of ways. These differences are usually called individual differences which can be age, aptitude, motivation, learning style and personality style. The findings of her study show that the learners could be classified into six groups namely visual director group, visual socializer group, visual relater group,

visual thinker group, auditory relater group, and auditory thinker group. Eventually, at the end of her research, Djariah Husain suggests that in order to determine factors for the success of teaching English, teachers must be aware of students' learning and personality style. Teachers should group English students according to their learning and personality style, and also teachers should match the teaching styles with the students' learning and personality styles in order to get better achievement.

In addition to Djariah Husain's findings, another investigation conducted by Reid (as cited in Exley, 2005) on Indonesian students studying in the United States finds a similar result that the students proposed auditory and kinesthetic learner characteristics as major learning style preferences; visual, tactile and individual learner characteristics as minor learning style preferences; and group learner characteristics as undesirable styles of learning. On the contrary, Lewis who interviewed 320 Indonesian English learners finds that students showed their preferences for progressive teaching methods. The students expect: practice English with its native speaker, teacher correction, learning in pairs and groups, watching English language television programs, listening to tapes, putting words into sentences, paraphrasing, reading English newspaper, studying grammar, and learning function.

In sum, all the studies above indicate that the Indonesian English language learners' learning style at public schools still stresses teacher-centered classrooms, where teachers are more active than the students. The activities in the classrooms are based on the textbooks and what the teachers say. Students sit in rows facing the teacher and spend most of the time copying from the blackboard. Therefore, it seems that Indonesian classroom strongly need for a change. It is indeed a qualified teacher who can change the classroom atmosphere and brings a new learning insight for students.

### *What Should be Done in Improving English Language Teaching*

It is very important that before applying any English teaching strategies in the classrooms, teachers first has to observe and review the learning style of the students with regard to their cultural backgrounds and ethnic groups. Other essential factor that every teacher must consider is that students learn best if they are actively involved in the learning process and when they are in learning situations that address their learning style preferences, (Wintergerst, DeCapua, & Verna, 2003).

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As the matter of fact, currently there is no best method for English language teaching in Indonesia other than what Indonesian teachers can elaborate based on learners' characteristic and cultural factors. McKay (2002) argues that with the spread of English all over the world, the choice of English teaching methodology should no longer be based on British, American or Australian models. There is no one English teaching method that can meet all learning contexts of English as the language of the globe today, nor is there a best way for each particular context. Everything depends on the teachers themselves.

In addition to way of teaching, current English language teaching materials in Indonesia also must be reviewed. Zacharias', (2005) study on the Indonesian teachers' beliefs finds that there is a need for local teachers to be empowered on how to develop their own materials to meet their specific learning and teaching situations. However, as stated by Brown, (2006), the standard textbook prescribed by the school curriculum must not be neglected because this resource may actually be useful. Hence, a balance between the standard textbook and the teachers' own material is extremely necessary.

Furthermore, during the teaching teachers should always emphasize mastery of four language skills that are listening, speaking, reading and writing. For example, to improve listening skill Chang and Read, (2006) have a good suggestion for teachers in improving their students' listening skill. They can support students' listening in the form of previewing the test's questions, topic preparation, and repetition of the input must be taken into account in English language teaching activities. These strategies might be helpful in developing the listening ability of Indonesian English language learners.

Dormer, (2007) also elaborates some solutions that might be helpful for English teachers to improve language skills. According to him, teachers should be given the opportunity to improve their English skills. The standard methodology also needs to be heightened. Effective language-teaching techniques are not difficult or complicated, and effective training would be very useful. Despite the current national curriculum that adopts the communicative language teaching in which the oral communicative skills are being taught, many teachers still do not teach communicative skills because they are not specifically tested. But this situation can be handled if the test writers focus on well-written communicative items which although

in a written format, it can still focus on communicative skills. When teachers are able to speak English fluently and they use a good teaching method, it seems that English language learners proficiency will improve better.

According to Patil, (2008) the general objective of teaching English should always be to enable learners to speak, read and write English fluently. To make this objective comes true communication with students must be maintained by creating occasions for them to use English in meaningful, realistic, and relevant situations. Games, role play activities, information gap tasks, brain storming exercises, puzzles, cartoons, anecdotes, jokes, songs and other low cost and easily available teaching materials may be used for this purpose. It is very crucial to make learners feel confident and comfortable with English by having them enjoy playing and experimenting with the language. Once they have felt confident and have got rid of that fear feeling, they try to use English creatively. Now, when English language learners are not afraid anymore of making mistakes, they will try to practice English as much as they can and to pick up more vocabularies and grammars. In order to make the language learning meaningful, Patil suggests teachers to use examples from students' native language occasionally.

Indonesian teachers teaching English language must have specific attention towards the teaching goals for English in Indonesia. McKay (2002) explains that the spread of English has brought with it language change and variation so that it is important to distinguish linguistic differences among new speakers of English. Thus, according to her, there are several goals in teaching English as the universal language. One goal of teaching English is to ensure there is no intelligibility problem occurs with some differences in particular pronunciation and grammatical patterns and sometimes in lexical innovation. The second teaching goal is to help learners develop strategies to achieve friendly relations when English is used with speakers from other cultures. McKay argues that in this case a native speaker target is inappropriate in a teaching of an international language because English has been localized with learners' cultures. Thus the goal in teaching English should not be to achieve native-like competence but rather to encourage the acquisition of interaction strategies that will promote comity. The last goal in teaching English in international context should be to develop textual competence. Since one of the main reasons for learning English today is

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to access the large amount of knowledge and information that is available in the language, teachers should be aware that it is very crucial to develop reading and writing skills besides speaking skills.

Brown, (2006) suggests eight guidelines that might be important to be considered by teachers teaching English in Indonesia due to the lack of ready communicative spheres outside the classroom. Those guidelines are as follows:

- 1) use class time for optimal authentic language input and interaction;
- 2) do not waste class time on work that can be done as homework;
- 3) provide regular motivation-stimulating activities;
- 4) help students to see genuine uses for English in their own lives;
- 5) play down the role of tests and emphasize more intrinsic factors;
- 6) provide plenty of extra-class learning opportunities, such as assigning an English-speaking movie, having them listen to an English-speaking TV or radio program, getting an English-speaking conversation partner, doing outside reading (news, magazines, books), and writing a journal or diary in English for the learning process;
- 7) the use of learning strategies outside class;
- 8) and form a language club and schedule a regular activities, (p. 117).

McKay, (2002) contends that the prevalent use of western cultural content in English language teaching texts need to be examined because local content seems to minimize the potential of marginalizing the values and lived experiences of the learners. In addition, source culture content does not place local teachers in the difficult position of trying to teach someone else's culture, which in this case the western cultures. English language should be taught in a way that respects the learners' culture of learning. McKay emphasizes the concept of thinking globally but acting locally for English teachers since the evidence suggests that the use of English today is growing continuously as a global language which belongs not only to native speakers, but also to all of its users, (p. 129).

Similar to McKay's suggestion, in order to motivate learners and to make language learning more enjoyable in English classrooms, Tsou (2005) also urges teachers to implement culture lessons into regular English language classrooms. Since reading, writing, listening and speaking are also applied in the culture lessons, students can continue to develop their language ability. Besides, part of the culture lessons can also involve students' native culture.

## Conclusion

Based on the concept offered and given the diversity of local cultures in Indonesia, it seems impossible that one method of English language teaching will meet the needs of all learners. Therefore, to overcome this constraint the role of teachers is very significant. They must be creative in preparing teaching content and making the classroom situation as communicative as possible. In addition, it is extremely crucial for teachers to comprehend their students' characteristics and cultural backgrounds.

As in Indonesia people culturally feel more prestigious if they can speak a foreign language, especially English, teachers should take the advantage by using this feeling to encourage their learners to take a risk wisely in learning and using English (Nenden, 2004). Eventually, English language learners in Indonesia must be willing to take a risk in the game of language to be successful English language learners. Teachers should take into account what Brown states in his book:

'Successful language learners, in their realistic appraisal of themselves as vulnerable beings yet capable of accomplishing tasks, must be willing to become "gamblers" in the game of language, to attempt to produce and to interpret language that is a bit beyond their absolute certainty (p. 63).'

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