

# English Teaching in Elementary Schools in Indonesia and Japan: Younger is Better?

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## Abstract

Ten years have passed since Indonesia started teaching English as a compulsory class in elementary school. In view of the past decade, English education in Indonesia is now facing some challenges that can possibly cause the educational pendulum to swing back. On the other hand, in 2011, Japan finally embarked on a compulsory English class called “Foreign Language Activities”, but it may be still premature to make the next decision in educational policy based on the outcome of the past three years. Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology (MEXT) in Japan, however, accepting the suggestion of the educational rebuilding council, clarified the policy of starting English education earlier: from the present the 5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. Indonesia and Japan have different issues to address in English education in elementary school. It is time to give a second look at the underlying principles of early childhood English education. The implication from these principals and the realities of a real-world classroom situation are integrated in policy making and it is of special importance for the two countries’ future in English education.

## Introduction

This paper will make a comparative study of English teaching in elementary schools in Indonesian and Japan. The purpose is to provide perspective on the scientific facts concerning foreign language learning in early childhood. Both in Indonesia and Japan, much controversy has existed over teaching English in elementary schools over the decades. It is not an exaggeration to say that the futures of English teaching in elementary schools in both countries are still up in the air. This paper can provide part of the answer regarding their decision on the future directions in improving English education in both countries.

## 1. English Teaching in Elementary School in Indonesia

### 1.1 Educational System in Indonesia

Indonesia is an archipelago with about 13,000 islands. Every neighboring area has its own local language; there are about 300 local languages totally different from the national language. Bahasa Indonesia is the national language, but only 7 percent of Indonesians use Bahasa Indonesia as their first language. English is the first foreign language in Indonesia. Education in Indonesia is under the authority of the Ministry of Education and Culture (*Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan* or *Kemdikbud*) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Kementerian Agama* or *Kemenag*). Islamic schools are under the authority of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The school year is divided into two semesters. The first commences in July and ends in December while the latter commences in January and ends in June. The constitution states that education in the country is divided into two parts: formal and non-formal. A formal education is divided again into three levels: primary, secondary and higher (tertiary) education.

Except for the division of two divided levels, school educational system including the level of student’s age is the same as the one in Japan. There are two different kinds of Indonesian high schools providing two

Table 1. Formal Education (Public and Private Schools)

1. Primary Education		
	Elementary school	Age 6–12
2. Secondary Education		
	Junior high school	Age 13–15
	Senior high school	Age 16–18

streams of education for those who choose to optionally enroll. One of these (vocational high school) is aimed at those who intend to go on to university. The other is for those who plan to find jobs right away, aimed to prepare students to enter employment and to develop professional skills and to prepare students to choose a career.

In Indonesia, Islamic schools (formal and informal education) are available from elementary to university level because the majority of Indonesian citizens are Muslim. As for compulsory education, Presidential Instruction Decree No. 10 of 1973 initiated Indonesia's program of compulsory education and by 1984 the government of Indonesia had fully implemented six-year compulsory education for primary school age children (6-12 years). The result of this new policy was significant in that the participation rate in primary school reached 92 percent in 1993 compared with 79 percent just 10 years earlier. Ten years after the compulsory primary education program came fully into effect, Indonesia launched the Nine Year Basic Education Program, as proclaimed by President Suharto on 2 May 1994, extending compulsory education to children aged 13 through 15 years old. The compulsory nine-year basic education affords opportunities for Indonesian citizens to get a necessary education. The extension from six years to nine years of basic education was also intended to alleviate the problem of child labor.

## 1.2 English Teaching in Elementary School in Indonesia

In the academic years from 1998/1999 to 2002/2003, English was taught to the students of 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades. Then, in the academic year of 2003/2004, English started to be taught to all the students from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

Although it is expected that Indonesian children take advantage of English education in school, it is not very easy for them to learn English in Indonesia. It is also true of English teachers in teaching those children. The reason of the difficulties on both sides stems from the fact that the students have to learn three languages at the same time at school: Bahasa Indonesia as a main subject, a local language, and English.

English teaching in elementary school in Indonesia focuses on the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Many teachers with experience of teaching English to young students in elementary school have commented on the students' difficulties in studying English. By observing the classroom, generally speaking, it is often said that the students are very good at English listening and speaking skills even though it is totally different from their local languages and national language. It is however an undeniable fact that the students have to struggle in reading and writing skills.

In addition to this, many English teachers agree that compared with reading and writing, around 75 percent, a majority of the students, have difficulties in remembering the vocabulary, 15 percent of them have difficulties in writing, and another 10 percent have to struggle with reading. Many factors are considered to be causing this problem but the most influential factor is the linguistic differences between English and Bahasa Indonesia, including phonetic system, word order, and vocabulary.

It cannot be denied that it is quite difficult for children to simultaneously cope with three languages. There is a fear that the children will be confused and end up in not learning any of the languages well enough.

As for the teachers, they use Bahasa Indonesia to teach English to the students, but if they find that the

students are not fully understanding, they have to switch their language code to the local language of the students for better understandings. By introducing English as early as possible, the original expectation is that the people in Indonesia can be more aware of the importance of acquiring English skills, and in the future, Indonesia can be a competitive country in this era of globalization.

### 1.3 Educational Pendulum in Indonesia

After ten years practice of English education in elementary school, in October 2012, the Indonesian government made a controversial decision, announcing that they would implement a new curriculum in the school year of 2013-2014, in which English would no longer be taught in elementary school. The Vice Minister of Education and Culture said that the main reason is that young children need to master their own national language well before they are introduced to a foreign language since the national language will be their identity. There is a big fear that introducing English at an early age will negatively influence their Indonesian language proficiency (Afifah, 2012).

This big decision caused pro and con reactions. The government also kept changing their formula concerning this new curriculum because there are many things that had to be taken into consideration before they applied this big change in English Education in Indonesia. Then after a long discussion, the final formula of the new curriculum was decided and began to be applied in the school year of 2013-2014 starting from July 2013. This new curriculum is now actually being applied in only 30 percent of the total number of schools in every city in Indonesia, but in the next school year it is expected to be applied nationwide (Koran-jakarta, 2012). In this starting year, it is partly applied: English will no longer be taught in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade because of the students' too young ages. The government is concerned about the importance of acquiring the native language as an agenda and the negative possibility of lowering the children's Indonesian language proficiency.

## 2. Early Childhood English Education

### 2.1 Situations in Other Countries

Being aware of globalization and the use of English as a Lingua Franca, it is important to grasp the situation in foreign countries. Today, English has begun to be taught to younger students in many countries. Table 2 shows the beginning years and ages of English teaching in elementary school in several countries. As shown in Table 2, in Indonesia, English began to be taught to the students from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade in 1998, then in 2003, the government decided to start teaching English to all students from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

Among these countries shown in Table 2, Thailand is the one which started earliest and gives English classes to the youngest students.

Table 2. English Teaching in Elementary School in Several Countries (MEXT, 2006).

	Korea	China	Taiwan	Thailand	France	Germany	Japan	Indonesia
The 1 <sup>st</sup> Starting Year	1997	2001	2001	1996	2007	2003	2011	1998
Grade	3 <sup>rd</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
The renewed Starting Year		2005	2005					2003
Grade		3 <sup>rd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>					1 <sup>st</sup>

Realistically speaking, in Germany and China, there is a large gap depending on the area. In France, the official beginning year is 2007, but actually 98.8 percent of schools had already begun teaching English to the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> graders even before. In Japan, it was reported that more than 90 percent of schools

had English education in some forms before 2011, although some of them had only a few hours a year and others had more frequent regular classes. Table 3 shows the weekly class hours of English education in each country.

Table 3. Class Hour of English Teaching per Week (MEXT, 2006).

	Korea	China	Taiwan	Thailand	France	Germany	Japan	Indonesia
Class hour	80 mins.	80 mins. and over	80 mins.	120-240 mins	60-120 mins.	90 min.s	45 mins.	70 mins.

In terms of class hours, it is clearly shown that Thailand is one of the most enthusiastic countries in English education. Japan is a slow starter and spends the least time in English class. In Indonesia, the class hours of English teaching per week is 70 minutes and it is exactly the same duration as the time used to teach other subjects. Even though English is not one of the main subjects at school, English has the same time allotment as other subjects and is considered to be as important as other subjects.

## 2. 2 Comparison between Indonesia and Japan

The overall objective of English class in Japanese elementary school is to form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages by mainly three factors: 1. developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, 2. fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and 3. familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages (MEXT, 2008). According to the goal, English classes focus on listening and speaking practice without any reading and writing.

On the other hand, there is no clear goal published by the Ministry of Education in Indonesia. However, English teaching in Indonesia generally focuses on the four skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. There are several differences of English teaching in elementary school in Indonesia and Japan as shown in Table 4:

Table 4. The Differences of English Teaching in Elementary School in Indonesia and Japan

	Indonesia	Japan
Teaching approach	Skill-based	Communication-based
Instructor	English specialized teacher	Homeroom teacher with Assistant Language Teacher (ALT)
Assessment	Numeral assessment	Assessment by word description
Teaching method	Working on textbook	Communicative activities
Cultural instructions	No cultural instruction	Understanding different cultures and languages is one of the goals. (e.g. how to say "hello" in other foreign languages)

In Indonesia, English is taught by an English teacher, but in Japan, the homeroom teacher, besides teaching other subjects, is also required to teach English assisted by an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). In Indonesia, assessment is done by numeral 0-100, while in Japan, assessment is done by word description to describe the student's communication ability. The main method of instruction used in Japan is engaging the students in many activities since the goal focuses only on fostering their communication abilities. On the other hand, in Indonesia, English teachers cover a textbook including writing and reading practice.

Another unique fact is that there is no cultural teaching in Indonesia. English is taught only as a language for communication. In Japan, however, the awareness of culture is also to be raised through learning English. This is based on the assumption that culture is an inseparable part of learning a language because of the mutual connection and it is considered to be essential in global communication. Understanding different cultures and languages is one of the objectives of English class in Japanese

elementary school.

### 2.3 Controversial Issues

One of many reasons underlying the increase in English education throughout the world is the common belief that the earlier English is introduced to the students, the better they learn. However, now it is time to ask: “Is younger really better?”.

As was mentioned before, actually Indonesia’s decision in English education made by government in 2012 was a step backward after ten year practice. This huge issue gained a lot of attention after the government’s announcement before it was officially put into enforcement in July 2013. This new curriculum has created a controversial discussion in Indonesia; some people agree with the government’s decision in deleting English in elementary school, but some do not.

Those who agree with the government’s decision are concerned about the difficulty encountered by young children suffering from learning three languages at the same time at an early stage: a local language, the national language, and English as a foreign language. Young children who cannot even speak Indonesian language correctly yet are required to study English. They think it is too much for young children. Some also argue that acquiring native language is more important than a foreign language. Indonesian language will be their national identity; therefore, they have to master the national language before they start learning a foreign language. According to those supporting the government’s decision, English can be taught after the children go to secondary school.

The majority of Indonesian people, however, disagree with the government’s decision. They think that deleting English from the elementary school curriculum is detrimental to Indonesian education. (Detik, 2012). Ten years ago, the Indonesian government made an excellent decision by starting to teach English from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students of elementary school as an advanced step from the previous policy in which English was taught only for the students of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade in 1998. They consider English as “the international language.” In their opinion, it is a must for all Indonesian children to acquire this language for enhancement of the international competitiveness of Indonesia.

Political observers have their own opinions about this big change in Indonesian education. Based on their political point of view, this is only a political maneuver done by the Ministry of Education and Culture: new minister, new policy. In Indonesia, there is a tendency that when a minister is replaced after a presidential period is finished, there must be a new policy made by the new minister as a special characteristic of her/his tenure. They predict that in the next presidential period, when the minister is replaced, there will be a new policy and the curriculum might be changed back to the previous formula. However, apart from the controversy caused by the policy change, most Indonesian people agree on one issue: that all Indonesian children need English education. It is only a question of when to start learning: whether it is taught at the early stage in elementary school or later at the secondary school level.

The majority of the world’s children are exposed to more than one language. In Indonesia, as mentioned before, besides the national language, every neighboring area has its own local language. Indonesian children are exposed to a local language and their national language from the time they are born. Then they start learning English as the first foreign language in Indonesia when they go to school.

Japan spent a decade debating over English education in elementary school before the official starting year 2011. It was frequently questioned: whether English should be compulsory or not in elementary school and if it is, who teaches it to what year, and how, etc. Some of those opposed were concerned about the negative influence on Japanese language. Unlike Indonesia, Japan does not suffer from learning three languages simultaneously, but many concerned about the importance of acquiring native language mentioned the decline in children’s Japanese language proficiency.

### 3. Learners' Age Factors

#### 3.1 Bilingual Research

Lightbown and Spada (2013) refer to children who learn more than one language from earliest childhood as 'simultaneous bilinguals', whereas those who learn another language later are called 'sequential bilinguals'. Therefore, regarding English, Indonesian children may be called 'sequential bilinguals'. More specifically, children in Indonesia are required to be trilingual in the end. They also point out that there is a considerable body of research on children's ability to learn more than one language in their earliest years. There is no evidence that learning more than one language substantially slows down their linguistic development.

#### 3.2 Critical Period Hypothesis

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) is the notion that there is a specific and limited time period for language acquisition. There are two versions of the CPH (Patsy Lightbown and Spada, 1996). The strong version is that children must acquire their first language by puberty or they will never be able to learn from subsequent exposure. The weak version is that language learning will be more difficult and incomplete after puberty. This notion is originally based on Leneberg's biological study (1967) which suggests lateralization of brain function before puberty. CPH has often been used for propaganda purposes by private English schools for young children. Although many researchers have tried to test the hypothesis, it has not been empirically proved yet, with different testing contexts producing different results. Therefore, among L2 researchers, the hypothesis is cautiously viewed.

#### 3.3 Common Underlying Language Proficiency

Cummins' interdependence or iceberg hypothesis (1979) shows the relationship of the first language to the learning of another language. In the hypothesis, the two different phenomena seen in two languages above the surface are actually interdependent psychologically. Therefore, two languages mutually influence the development of languages based on common underlying language proficiency. That implies that learning the second language can lead to improvement of the first language. It also suggests the importance of the first language abilities in order to acquire the second language.

Some opposed to English education at the elementary school level took the theory in a way that stressing the first language is really significant for firmly building common underlying language proficiency to support inner language. Then it was reasonably explained why the second language should not be given to children before the completion of the first language acquisition. Some of those who agree with the introduction of English class as a compulsory subject, on the other hand, take this theory as a good support for their claim: the second language, in this case, English, facilitates the first language development; concluding that learning a second language has a positive influence on children's perspective on languages and metalinguistic ability.

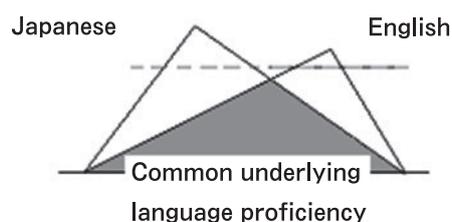


Fig1. Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1979).

### **3. 4 Mimicry Skills in L 2 Pronunciation**

Arao's study of mimicry skills in L 2 pronunciation and learner's age factor (2008) explores the relationship between mimicry skills in second language (L 2) sounds and the learner's age to gain insight into teaching L 2 pronunciations to learners at different ages. A major motivation for the study is to clarify whether or not young learners are in an advantageous position in terms of acquisition of L 2 pronunciation. The findings suggest that adults are good beginners with superior mimicry skills in L 2 pronunciation. They cannot rule out the possibility that young learners, who are initially worse at mimicking, may eventually surpass adult learners due to continuous mimicking practice over a long period of time. The belief in recent times is that children have the ability to copy and mimic others well, which, obviously, is just a thought held by many of those that view children's behavior in the classroom.

### **3. 5 Implicit vs. Explicit Learning**

DeKeyser (2000) examines Hungarian immigrants in the U.S with different age background as immigration timing to observe the relations between aptitude and grammaticality judgment. The results reveal that the learners who immigrated before puberty show high scores in grammaticality judgment test regardless of their aptitude. As for the learners who immigrated to the U.S after puberty, on the other hand, their results are found to be greatly influenced by aptitude. The study also suggests that implicit learning is for young learners, and explicit for adult learners.

### **3. 6 Effects of English Education at the Elementary School Level**

In a study by Gracīa & Gracīa (2003) , students who went through an old curriculum without English teaching in elementary school outperformed the ones given English teaching by a new curriculum in all English skills.

Similar results are shown by Oller and Nagato (1974) studying Japanese students. The findings shows that students who learned English in elementary school are better learners than those who started learning English for the first time in English class at junior high school. However, as time goes on, the latter group catches up with the former ones and there is not difference in English proficiency by the time they become high school students. The study suggests that older students are quick in learning.

In one of the latest studies after the introduction of English education as a compulsory course in Japan, by Watanabe (2012) , junior-high school English teachers were asked about the differences of English skills between students with an experience of learning English after implementation of a compulsory English course in 2011 and ones who had not gone through the compulsory course. The points included in this study are 1. listening comprehension ability. 2. speaking abilities, 3. pronunciation. The study shows that the compulsory English classes started in 2011 have made a difference in junior-high school students' phonological-based skills overall. It means that the goal of teaching English in elementary school is achieved to some degree.

## **4. Implication**

With relatively few empirical studies after only two years or so of practice of teaching English in Japanese elementary school, it is premature to clearly decide if the teaching is successful or not, let alone to assess the validity of making the starting age younger. As for Indonesia, on the other hand, ten years are long enough to make a decision for the next policy. Taking into consideration the learning of three languages at the same time with emphasis on four skills, it may be worth thinking of lightening the burden on children and avoiding unnecessary confusion.

That does not suggest an all or nothing approach in teaching English in Indonesian elementary school:

schools do not have to completely stop teaching English at the elementary level. As was shown in some past studies, early childhood language learning is never necessarily a disadvantage nor an advantage in the outcome of language learning. Although earlier studies have remained important regarding age factors in L2 acquisitions, the results cannot be generalized in different language learning contexts.

Clearly, the outcome of children's L2 learning is made up of a combination of a number of cognitive, linguistic and contextual variables. In some ways, Indonesia is more advanced and blessed with an English teaching environment in school than is Japan: with specialized English teachers and skill-based teaching from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> grades. English teaching at elementary school levels in Japan suffers from a lack of teachers with sophisticated teaching techniques and skills emphasizing communication instead of skills. This generates students with relatively better skills in phonological aspects than before; however, the effects are not robust enough to say that teaching English in Japanese elementary school is a real success.

## Conclusion

The problems and challenges faced by the two countries are different in quality, so the recent orientations in educational policy are going off in completely different directions.

Indonesia might want to make a minor modification before undergoing a drastic change and destruction in well-developed English education in elementary school; for example, putting emphasis on all of the four skills from the 1<sup>st</sup> st grade may not be the best pedagogical choice. They can limit which skills to focus on in order to avoid cognitive overload. Fortunately, the importance of learning English in Indonesia is highly acknowledged in public; therefore, people in different positions and professions with different viewpoints should be invited to share their ideas with careful reflection on ten years of practice in teaching English in elementary school.

Japan is today oriented to advance earlier teaching of English in elementary school, following the past global trend. MEXT actually made the policy public that English education will be provided beginning from the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and English will be an official subject for the 5<sup>th</sup> year students beginning in 2020 (Yomiuri Online, 2013). The new policy under consideration shows that the class meets once or twice a week for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> graders and three times for the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> graders.

Looking at these realistic issues and facts, the two countries have come up with diametrically opposed policies regarding English education at the elementary school level. Care and fine adjustment must be taken in the implementation of educational policy change. The future is becoming increasingly global and it behooves educators in the both countries to engage in fundamental debate on the future shape of English education.

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