English Teaching in PKBM Satya Parahita: Insights for Teacher Education Program

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ABSTRACT

Teaching and learning is certainly a complex process. This complexity is even more prevalent when dealing with an L2 teaching in FL contexts. Teachers have to deal not only with the target language as a subject but also with the community in general and learners in particular. Such techniques that work well in an L2 context might produce different results in an FL context. Spolsky (1989), however, argued that as long as the technique used is suitable for relevant conditions, e.g. the situations, the goals, and the learners, the benefits of learning are still undeniable. The basic theories about L2 learning process, moreover, do not differentiate L2 contexts from FL contexts. Paul (2003), however, points out that the classroom application derived from those theories may be different. Teachers therefore should be able to apply the learning context and adapt rather than impose certain approaches. This paper is based on the classroom observations conducted in PKBM Satya Parahita, Salatiga. It aims at showing how the teachers adapted certain concepts into their local context in order to teach English to the children two to four years of age. Such findings can surely enrich our teaching perspectives.

Key words: L2 learning, FL learning, Young learners

INTRODUCTION

English language learning does not take place only in a second language (L2) context where the society communicates using English. With English being a lingua franca, English learning happens in a foreign language (FL) context as well. While it is possible for L2 learners to pick up the language naturally in an L2 context as if they were acquiring their L1, it may be doubtful that this natural process can be obtained in an FL context, since the language learning process is mostly achieved through formal instructions. Spolsky (1989), however, argued that there was actually no significance difference between those who received formal instructions and those who did not; and that formal instructions certainly are beneficial to language learners. Quoting a study done by Collentine and Freed (2004), Mackey in Fasold and Connor-Linton (2006) also voiced the same claims; that one context is not superior to another for all language skills.

The basic theories about L2 learning process do not differentiate L2 contexts from FL contexts. However, Paul (2003) states that the classroom application derived from those theories may be different. As what Philip and Tognini (2009) point out, teachers teaching English in an FL context have to deal not only with the target language as a subject but also with the community in
general and the learners in particular. Techniques that appear to be sophisticated and promising in a certain context might be perceived differently in another context. Spolsky (1989), however, argued that as long as the techniques chosen are suitable for relevant conditions, e.g. the situations, the goals, and the learners, the benefits of teaching are still undeniable.

Considering such an issue, this paper aims at showing how the English teachers of PKBM Satya Parahita adapted the language learning concepts into their local context in order to teach English to the children two to four years of age. Nevertheless, to what extent the techniques used was effective is not the main concern of this study. It is expected that the findings can enrich our perspectives and provide insights into the practice of teaching English to young learners in Salatiga.

L2 LEARNING IN FL CONTEXT

The term second language (L2) learning refers to the processes through which someone acquires one or more second or foreign language in both naturalistic contexts and in the classroom setting (Steinberg, Naşata, and Aiine, 2001; Mitchell and Myles, 2004; Mackey, 2006). Hence, the underlying process of learning L2 in L2 and FL contexts are considered similar. Nevertheless, one has to admit that the different contexts indeed bring significance differences in term of expectations, learners' goals, curriculum and assessment (Philp and Tognini, 2009). These surely influence the classroom practice, e.g. the frequency and duration of instruction and the role of conversational interaction in the classroom (ibid).

It has been well accepted that learning an L2 has a similar process as children's learning their L1. Exposure and interaction, therefore, should become the main ingredients of L2 learning. In a language classroom, as Brown (2007) noted, teachers play their role as caretakers. As what parents do to their children when exposing the L1, teachers are expected to do the same to their students. They need to expose the students with a massive amount of target language input. Moreover, the input should foster meaningful communicative use of the language in an appropriate context (Brown, 2007). However, in regard to L2 learning in FL contexts, such idealistic condition is sometimes hard to provide. Many factors (e.g. the teachers, the learners, the local context, etc.) will affect the policies in regards to the teaching and learning process. What works well in one context might be perceived differently in another context.

CHILDREN AS L2 LEARNERS

L2 learners can be anyone, ranging from very young learners to adults. The teaching techniques used to support the L2 learning process therefore has to be in accordance to the learners' age. Concerning young learners, the L2 input should be provided in a meaningful context because they need to see a clear connection between the speech sound produced and the objects, events, or situations (Steinberg, et al., 2001). As a result, teachers should only talk about concrete objects and events that are happening in front of their eyes. They should not talk about abstract or remote objects and events (Johnson, 2001). Since young learners learn best through induction or self discovery, Tomlinson (2005) suggest that they should be given a lot of varied experience of the language through stories, songs, games and play activities.

To acquire an L2 successfully, memory plays a crucial role. Steinberg et al. (2001) explain two basic types of memory operating in language learning: associative learning, where a connection is
formed between an object and the sound-form of that object, and episodic memory, where whole events or situations are remembered along with phrases and sentences that others have spoken. Children at the age of 5 or 6 still display a phenomenal ability at rote memorization, whereas older children do not. The rote memorization begins to decline at around 8 years of age, and will decline more at about 12 years of age. To learn an L2, young children rely heavily on their use of rote memory, whereas older children begin to apply their cognitive abilities in analyzing the syntactic rules.

WHICH LANGUAGE TO USE?

Language choices, especially in an FL classroom context, raise a controversy. Some scholars and educational policy makers believe that teachers have to avoid using the L1. As the classroom provides the main source of L2 input, with primary input from the teacher or teaching resources, limited use of an L2 by teachers restricts both the quality and quantity of input available to learners (Kim and Elder, 2005; Tognini, 2008 in Philp and Tognini, 2009). In FL contexts, L2 learners do not have a chance to hear the language outside the classroom. Maximizing the use of L2 in the classroom, therefore, will provide greater opportunity for the learners to hear as much of the target language as possible. The more L2 the learners hear, the more they will learn.

Others, however, argue that the use of L1 to some extent can still benefit the L2 learning process. Cameron (2009), for instance, pointed out that to assume a simple linear relationship between exposure to language and learning ironcs much of the complexity of teaching and learning, and ignores the possibility that certain uses of a common mother tongue might also contribute to L2 learning. Strategies such as translating L2 words into L1 and making contrasts between L1 and L2 forms may facilitate acquisition (Rolin-Ianzity and Brownlie, 2002 in Philp and Tognini, ibid), and evidence shows that code-switching can enhance input by making linguistic items more salient (Turnbull and Arnett, 2002, in ibid). Cameron (ibid) articulated further that if the teacher and class share a common mother tongue, it is very uncommon to avoid using the L1. When dealing with children, especially in an FL context, the total use of the L2 is even more unnatural.

METHODOLOGY

Context of the study

PKBM Satya Parahita is located in Tegalrejo, Salatiga. It is under the supervision of Research Center and Gender Study, Satya Wacana Christian University (SWCU). According to the educational structures in Indonesia, this school is a non-formal education, categorized as PAUD (Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini), subdivision of Kelompok Bermain. The school has twenty students two to four years of age. They come from the lower to middle class of society. While some children are consistent enough in coming to the school, some others tend to come and go. These children are not grouped based on their age as the school believes that the older children can help the younger ones, and the younger ones can learn from the older ones. They meet three times a week for two hours. The lesson is divided into three phases, i.e. pre, while, and post teaching, with drawing, coloring, and making origami as the main activities. Bahasa Indonesia is used as the medium of instructions, but English is introduced to the students. The focus of English teaching is more on introducing English vocabulary at the word level.
Participants

The participants in this study were three teachers, one full timer and two students teachers. The full timer, Ibu Flora (a pseudonym), has been teaching young learners for seventeen years. She graduated from a diploma program for kindergarten teachers. The student teachers, Nila and Yulia (pseudonyms), were fourth year students from the English department. They were doing their teaching practicum for two months.

Data collection procedures

This study employed both method triangulation and data triangulation. There were four kinds of data gathering techniques, i.e. interviews, video recordings, field notes, and journal entries; and three different sources, i.e. the teachers, the coordinator, and the observer or the researcher. The researcher here acted as both participant and non-participant observer. The interview was done to elicit information about the practice of English Language Teaching in the school context, i.e. the purpose of teaching English, the use of certain techniques, the kind of English exposure, and some of the challenges. The video recordings, filed notes, and the researcher's journals were used as the basis for developing the interview questions. In regards to the collection procedures, I can say that it was not really a linear process in which one was done after the other. Sometimes, for example, an interview had to be done while the observation period was still going on.

Data analysis

In this study, as was the other kinds of qualitative research, the data was analyzed using inductive reasoning processes. It was analyzed starting from the raw data, and formed into larger categories (Creswell, 2007). This process is also known as a “grounded” approach to data analysis, in which the researcher begins with the data and through analysis (searching for salient themes or categories and arranging these to form explanatory patterns) arrives at an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Ellis and Barkhuzein, 2005 in Nunan and Bailey, 2009: 421). Doing this makes the data analysis an iterative process of reading, thinking, rereading, posing questions, searching through the records, and trying to find patterns (Nunan and Bailey, 2009).

FINDINGS

Based on the observation, several points concerning the teaching and learning process could be found as the followings:

1. The First language was used as the medium of instruction. Indonesian, instead of English, was used as the main language in the school context. Teachers and students communicated in Indonesian. When asked about the English teaching provided by this school, Ibu Flora strongly claimed that “English is not the priority”. She then explained the rationales behind the teaching of English to these children. First, there was a demand from the society in general to master English. Second, with Indonesian society in favor of the early learning of English, the parents expected their
children to be introduced to English in order to prepare them at the kindergarten level. Third, theories claim that between zero to six years of age is a golden period to provide as much input as possible due to children's amazing ability to absorb. It was, however, not the responsibility of preschools to start introducing English to learners. Also, to avoid burdening the children, this school decided not to expose them to a lot of English. The purpose of English teaching was only to introduce English vocabulary to the students, so that the students would be able to name a certain object in two languages, i.e. Indonesian and English.

What the school did was in line with what Philp and Tognini (2009) pointed out. To decide how the L2 teaching would be applied, the school had to consider several factors such as the status of the L2, the languages of the community, the expectations, the curriculum, and the learners themselves. This school wanted to cater to the demands of the community in general and the parents in particular without moving too far from the guidelines provided by the government. Moreover, as Cameron (2009) claimed, the teacher’s perceptions of their students’ ability and the status of the school would influence the difference amount of L1 use. The school in general and the teacher in particular believed that exposing the children to a lot of English might burden them. With such a view, the English teaching was limited to introducing only English vocabulary, and the L1 was used as a medium of instruction.

2. English exposure was only at the word level. The students were exposed to English only at the word level—mostly one word— as seen in the following extracts. In Extract 1 (lines 7-9), the students were introduced to the English word stamp, and in Extract 2 (line 9) to the word mailbox.

Extract 1: taken on March 30
1. T : Nah, kalau mau kirim surat kemarin diatas amplopnya ditempelin apa? /When we want to send letters, what should we put on the envelope?
2. S : ... [Unintelligible]
3. T : Ditempelin apa? /What?/
4. S : Perangko. /Stamp./
5. T : Perangko. /Stamp./
6. : Pintar. /Clever./
7. : Nah perangko Bahasa Inggrisnya? /What is the English word for perangko?/
8. : Hayo(!), Kemaren? /Yes? Yesterday?/
9. Ani : Stamp. [:setam]
10. T : Ya? /Yes?/
11. Ani : Stamp. [:setam]
12. T : Iya. Pinter /Yes. Clever./

Extract 2: taken on March 30
1. ...
2. T : Ini gambar kotak surat.
3. : Iya, kotak surat.
   /Yes, a mailbox./

4. : Jadi, kalau kita mau mengirim surat, nanti suratnya dimasukkan ke dalam kotak surat.
   /So, we can drop off our mail into the mailbox./

5. : Warna nya apa? [pointed to the red color]
   /What color is it?/

6. : Ini warnanya apa hayo?
   /What is the color?/

7. S3 : Red.
   /Red. Clever./

9. : Kalau kotak surat, Bahasa Inggrisnya mailbox.
   /A mailbox is mailbox in English./

10. : Mailbox.

11. : Apa tadi Bahasa Inggrisnya kotak surat?
    /What is the English word for kotak surat?/

12. : Mail (.) box.

13. : Mailbox.

When questioned about this, Ibu Flora first referred to the purpose of English teaching, which was only to introduce the children to English vocabulary. She then mentioned the age factor: “Exposing two, three, or four English words to children two to four years of age would be difficult.” She stated her fear about the effect of such exposure: “I’m afraid that this would interfere with the words they have learned.”

The very young learners in this context were only expected to be able to name certain objects in English. When they were given an Indonesian word, they would be able to provide an English translation for that particular word. The exposures therefore were limited only to introducing words and not complex thoughts. Although some two-word objects could be found, all were still nouns, such as electric stove, public telephone, and post office. In addition to nouns, the children were also introduced to some verbs such as jump, run, sleep, stand up, and sit down; and colors. All were still at the word level.

From both of the extracts, it could also be seen how the teacher exposed the L2 to the students. The teacher first introduced certain concepts in the L1 and then certain words in the L2. In Extract 2, for instance, the teacher first introduced the concept of kotak surat (mailbox) in Indonesian (lines 4-8), e.g. what a mailbox is, what it is for, what is the color, and then the English word for kotak surat (line 9). In Extract 1, the teacher first reminded the students the concept of perangko (stamp) in Indonesian (lines 1-5), i.e. what it is for, and then asked them the English word for perangko (lines 7-8).

As the children were only expected to be able to name certain objects in English and that the school wanted to focus more on developing the children’s L1, the extent of the L2 exposure and the
use of such a technique to introduce the L2 words could be well understood. When compared to the native English speakers two years of age, these L2 learners’ ability was of course still far from that since they received only a limited exposure of English. However, similar to what Spolsky (1989) believes, Steinberg et al. (2001) also assert that students will certainly learn from any techniques, since they are exposed to the data of an L2 and are given an opportunity to learn the language.

3. The use of AVA. Introducing a certain concept to very young learners is quite a difficult task. Providing speech input only is not enough as children need to see the objects or experience the events associated with the speech (Johnson, 2001; Steinberg et al., 2001; Cameron, 2009). With their learning styles still dominantly kinesthetic, very young learners need to see and touch things (Tavil and Söylemez, 2008). Pictures, flash cards and realia, therefore, would be of beneficial to use.

Extract 3: taken on March 30

1. T : Nah, kalo kita mau mengirim surat, nanti ampiopnya dimasukkan kemana?
   /Where can we drop off our mail?/

2. : Ada yang tahu ndak ini gambar apa? [Showing a picture of a mailbox] /Does anybody know what picture it is?/

3. : Ini gambar apa?
   /What picture is it?/

4. : Ada yang tahu ndak? Ayo? [moved around and showed the picture]
   /Does anybody know? Come on./

5. S1 : [touched the picture] Surat. /Letter./

6. T : Surat? Iya surat. [moved to the next student]
   /Letter? Yes, letter./

7. S2 : [touched the picture] Surat. /Letter./

8. : [some more students repeated saying surat]

   /This is a picture of a mailbox./

10. : Iya, kotak surat.
    /A mailbox./

11. : Jadi, kalau kita mau mengirim surat, nanti suratnya dimasukkan kedalam kotak surat.
    /So, we can drop off our mail into the mailbox./

12. : Warnanya apa? [pointed to the color red]
    /What is the color?/

13. : Ini warnanya apa hayo?
    /What color is it?/


15. T : Red. Pinter.

16. : Kalau kotak surat, Bahasa Inggrisnya mailbox.
    /A kotak surat is a mailbox in English./
In Extract 3, the teacher wanted to introduce the word mailbox; first in Indonesian, then in English. Besides asking a question and giving an explanation, she also used a picture. When the teacher showed the picture to S1, she touched it and said surat (line 5). Another student, S2, also did the same as S1 (line 7). Throughout the observation, I also noticed that once the children were curious, they did not want to only see the pictures or objects the teachers brought but also touch them.

This finding therefore could explain why nouns became the most frequent words taught to the students. Ibu Flora stated that “it is easier for the children to understand something they can see. An abstract concept is difficult for them to remember. Because of this, we introduce them to real things in their surrounding environment: the things they can see and touch.” Both Nila and Yulia also articulated the same point. As what the caretakers do when exposing the L1 to their children, the teachers also did the same to these young L2 learners. They introduced the children only to objects they could see or touch. If the objects could not be found in the classroom, pictures, flashcards, or realia were then used.

4. The use of translation techniques. To introduce an English word, the teacher used a translation technique from Indonesian into English or the other way around as seen in the following extract.

**Extract 4: taken on March 24**

1. T : Sekarang tangannya dilepas.  
   /Now, release your hands/
2. T : Kita nyanyi “Kita Berjalan Ikan Berenang”.  
   /Let’s sing “Kita Berjalan Ikan Berenang”./
3. T : Kalau ikan apa Bahasa Inggrisnya?  
   /What is the English word for ikan?/
4. Adi : Fish. [loudly]
5. T : Pintar. [showing two thumbs up]  
   /Clever./
6. T : Kalau air? Apa Bahasa Inggrisnya air?  
   /What about water? What is the English word for water?/
7. Ani : Water [loudly, though the -r sound was not clearly pronounced, just like a three-year-old kid usually did]
8. T : Pintar.  
   /Clever./
10. T : Kalau hujan?  
    /What about rain?/
11. Ani : Apa Bahasa Inggrisnya hujan?  
    /What is the English word for hujan?/
12. Ani : Rain. [jumping]
13. T : Apa?  
    /What?/
When the teacher asked the student the English version for a certain word, she used expressions such as “Apa Bahasa Inggrisnya ...” (lines 6 and 11), or “Kalau ... apa Bahasa Inggrisnya?” (lines 4 and 6). When questioned about this, Ibu Flora explained from two perspectives. One was the teacher’s view; the other was the students’ view. From the teacher’s view, she said that it was a kind of strategy for her to overcome her limitation; “If I did not use that technique, I would forget.” Although she had been teaching young learners for seventeen years, her major was not in ELT. Several times during our conversation, she admitted that she could not speak English fluently. Despite this limitation, she still tried to introduce English vocabulary to the students. Such was a common condition in an FL context, as articulated by Philp and Tognini (2009). The level of the teacher’s target language proficiency may vary from fluent confidence to limited competence, some teachers even learning alongside the students. To expect a greater standard of the English teaching, as Ibu Rita—the school supervisor—admitted, it seemed impossible due to the limitation of the human resources at this moment. To counter this condition, the school cooperated with the English Department and the Community Service students of SWCU by providing a site for teaching practicum and community service activities.

From the students’ view, Ibu Flora explained that this was done to minimize the students’ confusions. “If a word was not translated, the students might get confused. What the students know is Indonesian, not English. So, if we introduce English directly and do not say the Indonesian word, the students will be confused.” I found this situation when I had a chat with Ella during the break. When I pointed to the picture of a leaf in the puzzle she was playing with and said green, she said hijau several times as if she corrected me. I then explained to her that the English word for hijau was green. Ibu Flora explained further that this was also to maximize the use of the first language, “Many students still use their native language. It does not mean that it is not good, but maximizing the use of Indonesian is also important. So, we want to introduce English without neglecting Indonesian.” This point was similar to Nila’s perspective. She stated that “A translation technique is important as the children need to know the L1 first. It is the language they know. Sometimes, they even do not know Indonesian. They speak using Javanese.” To illustrate, in Extract 5 line 8, Nesya used Javanese to respond to the teacher’s question (line 2).

**Extract 5: taken on April 15**

1. **T**: Kemana? [The assistant’s voice saying Taman Pintar]
   /Where?/
2. **Oh**, Taman Pintar. Iya, sama siapa biasanya kalo pergi piknik?
   /Oh, Taman Pintar. Yes, who do you usually go with?/
3. **[No response]**
4. **[Ibu Flora’s voice asking Yon]**
5. **Yon**: Papah.
   /Daddy./
At another time, I noticed that Ano answered the teacher’s question in Javanese. When the teacher asked the color of the hat in a picture, he said ireng instead of hitam. Moreover, Yulia argued that the translation technique was beneficial to bridge the gap between the old and new students, “Some children are not accustomed to English, especially the new ones. They have not received any English exposure yet.”

Scholars (e.g. Cook, 2000 in Hall, 2001) might argue that such a translation technique might not be effective for L2 learning. In an FL context where the learners rarely hear the L2 in their daily lives, limited use of L2 restricts both the quality and quantity of input available to learners (Kim and Elder, 2005; Tognini, 2008, in Philp and Tognini, 2009). However, one cannot forget the other factors influencing all the decisions, such as the teachers themselves (their L2 competencies and beliefs), the status of the L2, and the learners (Cameron, 2009; Philp and Tognini, ibid).

CONCLUSIONS

From the findings, it could be seen how PKBM Satya Parahita tried to adapt the L2 learning concepts into their local context. Considering the language used by the community, and the status of the L2, the teaching of English in this school is only as an addition. In daily life, English is never used. The children speak with their caretakers (parents, siblings, and relatives) mostly in Javanese, and some in Indonesian. Moreover, only a few of the parents understand some English vocabulary. Exposing children to too much English will therefore create difficulties and might burden them. Besides, the fact that most of the students have not mastered Indonesian becomes the school’s main concern. Within this country, mastering Indonesian is actually more important than English as the language is used as a means of communication across regions. The goal of teaching the L2 therefore is only to introduce its vocabulary related to things the children can find in their surroundings. When the children are given an Indonesian word, they are able to provide an English translation for that particular word.

As English was not the school’s priority, the teaching of the language was embedded in all the teaching stages. Indonesian was used as the medium of instruction. Although the use of L1 in the language classroom is not strongly suggested (Kim and Elder, 2005; Tognini, 2008 in Philp and Tognini, 2009), still the decision to use the L1 in this context was made in accordance with factors such as expectations, goals, curriculums, and stakeholders as what Philp and Tognini (2009) point out. The teachers in this context had to introduce the concepts first in Indonesian and then the English words for certain things. To do this, a translation technique from Indonesian to English was used. Despite the fact that such a technique is no longer preferred, the teachers asserted that this was the best technique to cater to the contextual factors (e.g. the language spoken by the community, the learners, the teacher’s L2 competence). Such an argument was in line with what
Spolsky (1989) claims, as long as the techniques are appropriate with the relevant conditions, e.g. the situations, the goals, and the learners, the L2 learners could still gain the benefits of teaching.

Looking at what the teachers of PKBM Satya Parahita have done can surely provide insights to the English teachers in FL contexts. As teachers, we should be able to adapt rather than impose certain approaches as what is voiced by Tomlinson (2005) and Paul (2003), whose research is mostly concerned with teaching English in an Asian context. Tomlinson (2005) strongly suggest that teachers need to borrow and adapt the approaches to their local cultures, and not just rigidly apply certain concepts, and Paul (2003) point out that classroom application derived from learning theories may be different depending on the learning context.

REFERENCES


