

Students' Age at which EFL is Introduced in Schools and Educational Outcomes

Chuzaimah Dahlan Diem

Language Education Study Program PPS-UNSRI

Abstract: This study tries to see the relationship between the age at which EFL is introduced in public schools and educational processes and outcomes. A survey involving 229 students from elementary and junior high schools in Palembang is conducted. The population consists of those who have never taken extra non-formal English courses. These students are given the *same* English tests comprising mostly vocabulary and reading comprehension followed by a small portion of grammar. It is hypothesized that those who start learning English earlier have better achievement. Curriculum, intensity of instruction, teacher education level, years of ELT experience are considered in the analysis, in addition to class size, students' SES and gender. Stepwise regression analysis is applied to identify which variable contributes to students' outcomes. The results show there is no correlation between age alone and the students' EFL achievement. However, negative significant correlation is found between the students' achievement and teacher education level and also between the students' achievement and SES. Finally, some implications of research for theory, policy, and practice are suggested.

Key words: age, EFL learning, elementary school, junior high school, teacher education level

Many researchers in applied linguistics assert that there is a relationship between age of language learners and their achievement. However, whether or not the relationship is significant and how significant the contribution is, now, in relation to the policy of the government of Indonesia

that offers English, as a local content, beginning from the fourth grade in some elementary schools is what this study wants to find out. It is said that the younger the foreign language learners are the better chance they would learn the target language, especially in terms of accent and pronunciation. Older learners (at puberty or older) are faster learners in a way compared to children. As older learners are keen in analyzing word formation and structural patterns, children or younger learners are more motivated, very keen in imitating accent and pronunciation. In addition, this study is also intended to investigate another area, such as students' reading comprehension in which the two groups of EFL learners (end of fifth grade vs. end of eighth grade) maybe different in relation to educational processes and learning environment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Differential success in second language acquisition or foreign language learning may be caused by several factors, such as, age (d'Anglejan, 1990), language aptitude (McLaughlin, 1990), attitudes and motivation (McGoarty, 1996), social-psychological factors (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996; Rickford, 1996), personality, cognitive style, hemisphere specialization (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991: 153), parents' education (Zakiyah, 2002), learning strategies (Ihsan & Diem, 1997), and even gender (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996). The present study mainly tries to focus on one of the factors, that is, age of the learners at which they firstly learn English as a foreign language. In terms of second language acquisition or foreign language learning, learners begin acquiring the language at a later age than do first language learners. All children with normal faculties within normal circumstances master their mother tongue at the age of four but not all older children can acquire a second language or learn a foreign language without struggle and without limited success. In other words, age is one of the factors that relates to the degree of one's success in second language acquisition or foreign language learning. Singleton (1999: 218) states that most if not all aspects, including lexicons, of L2 acquisition, are affected by the age factor. With respect to the development of English literacy, d'Anglejan (1990) found that those of age 6-7 made more rapid progress in English reading that is initiated at that level. This statement supports what Krashen et al. (1979), Lightbown

and Spada (1994), and Harley et al. (1995) have concluded based on their research that age is a significant factor that influences one's learning achievement. They assert that older is faster, but younger is better.

Following the Critical Period Hypothesis or Sensitive Period Hypothesis, there is "an age-related point (generally puberty) beyond which it becomes difficult or impossible to learn a second language to the same degree as native speakers (NS) of that language" (Gass and Selinker, 2001: 334). However, not all researchers agree with this view. Related to this statement, this study is intended to give more evidence whether or not that age is one of the crucial factors determining or influencing one's achievement in foreign language (FL) learning, especially in their receptive skill, such as reading. Therefore, based on the background above, it is hypothesized that:

- there is a significant correlation between student's age at which EFL is introduced in schools, teacher education level, years of EFL teaching, intensity of instruction, students' Socio Economic Status (SES), and their English achievement; if significant correlation among the variables is found, then some variables must influence the students' outcomes;
- there is a significant difference between the English achievement of the students of the elementary school and that of junior high school in terms of students' age, teacher education level, years of ELT experience of the teachers, intensity of instruction, and students' SES.

METHOD

The major purpose of the study is to see whether students' age is statistically related to their English outcomes. Therefore, data for this study are obtained by using measures designed for and used with students at their level. A secondary purpose of the study is to see whether the addition of some other factors, especially, teacher education level, years of ELT experience, intensity of instruction, and students' SES (assuming that class size and student's gender in each level of education are somewhat the same), to the prediction model predicting EFL achievement variable from age results in a significant increase in the explained variation for student achievement in learning EFL. Therefore, particular factors as

mentioned above required to obtain the increase in explained variation and yet provide a parsimonious model for students' achievement measures are identified. Another purpose of the investigation is to subjectively compare the resulting prediction models for the population comprising two groups of students who started learning English at 10 and at 13 years of age. In other words, the 5th graders are at the age of 11, and the 8th graders are at 14 as it is generally true that the first graders start at the age of 7.

The population from which the sample is drawn for this study consists of a selected group of students who have learned English for more or less 2 years both at elementary and junior high schools in Palembang. Specifically, subjects chosen for the sample were those who never took any English courses other than those provided in class at their schools following the curriculum suggested. Prior to the collection of data, the principal of each school was contacted and only that, who agreed to her/his school participation was included in the study. Students and their teachers of English at each of those schools were asked to respond to the instrument employed, that is a set of English test comprising mostly reading comprehension, vocabulary, and a little bit of grammar to measure the students' English achievement. This test was tried out to 189 fifth graders and eighth graders of several other schools in Palembang and the result shows that the reliability of the test is 78.

The reason for including only three components of English in the test is that children learn English language through firstly listening to adults reading stories to them, then reading by themselves, followed by vocabulary development and not too much of grammar (Read also Dixon-Krauss, 2001). According to Cooper (1988) it is from oral language that students develop their ability to use the written symbols in reading. Oral language is clearly the foundation on which all reading is built. Why not much grammar? Halliwell (1992) said that at the primary school level the children's capacity for conscious learning of forms and grammatical patterns is still relatively undeveloped.

Assuming that such variables as class size (more or less 40 students in each class) and gender are somewhat similar for both groups except age, then the same test was given to both groups in order to find out whether difference in age would result in different outcomes. However, since the quality of students may also vary based on the quality of the

schools and the background of the students might make a difference in students' outcomes, then the curriculum, teacher education level, years of English language teaching experience, intensity of instruction, and the students' SES are certainly identified through the school records, teachers themselves, and site visit to the schools and are included in the model and considered qualitatively or quantitatively in the analysis.

In relation to the educational processes the following terms need explanation.

- (a) *The curriculum.* To teach the students English as a foreign language at the elementary schools, the teachers use the curriculum of the Department of National Education (1996) designed as the local content. But at the junior high school the curriculum is formally designed for EFL as a compulsory subject which is subject to be tested at the National Final Examination.
- (b) *Intensity of instruction.* At the elementary level, English is taught two hours a week while at the junior high school, it is taught 4 hours a week.
- (c) *Teacher education level.* The teachers involved in teaching the sample students of the junior high school are all permanent teachers and have become public servants. These teachers graduated from D₂ Program, D₃ PGSM Program, and S₁ PGSM Program. Meanwhile, for the elementary school, none of them are permanent teachers. Instead, they are either student teachers from sixth-semester of S1 program who take turns teaching at the school as volunteer teachers every semester or a part-time S₁ graduate teacher.
- (d) *Years of ELT experience.* All the sixth-semester-student teachers teaching at the elementary school have only six month-EFL teaching-experience (i.e. when they have their EYL subject practicum) while one of them has one and a half year teaching experience.
- (e) *Class size.* At the elementary school, 3 classes were involved and the range of the students in each class is between 35 and 45 the junior high school there are also three classes involved in the study and the size of each class is around 36 to 40.

In terms of the background of the students, the following information

can be presented.

(a) *Socio-Economic-Status.*

From the elementary schools, there are 7 (6.03%) farmers, 49 (42.24%) blue-collar workers, (10.34%) public servants, 17 (14.66%) small traders, 19 (16.38%) private sector workers, and 12 (10.34%) drivers. From the junior high school, there are 4 (3.53%) soldiers, 7 (6.2%) public servants, 6 (5.31%) car drivers, 24 (21.24%) bricklayers, 31 (27.43%) servants, 12 (10.62%) pedicab drivers, and 29 (25.66%) merchants.

(b) *Gender*—There are 103 males (57 elementary school students; 46 junior high school students); 126 females (59 elementary school students and 67 junior high school students)

To assess the relations among the variables, all of the quantitative data are analyzed using Pearson-product-moment correlation coefficient analysis followed by stepwise multiple regression analyses, and the hypotheses are tested applying associated F-statistics using an alpha level of .05 if significant correlations are found. And to see the mean difference between the two groups of the students ANOVA is used.

RESULTS

In reporting the results of the study, the discussion is divided into sections describing the hypothesized findings and a summary of the actual findings. However, before discussing the specific results obtained from the testing of the hypotheses and summarizing the findings, the following descriptive information is presented.

Summaries of sample sizes, means, and standard deviations of the variables

Table 1. Summaries of Students' Achievement Based on Students' Age

Variable	Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation
11 years	116	44.89	15.07
14 years	113	44.73	8.87

Table 2. Summaries of Student Achievement Based on Teacher-Education Level

No.	Educational Outcomes	Education Level of the Teachers	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	Total EFL Achievement	D2	44.33	8.54
		6 th semester	50.65	10.24
		S1	36.95	11.49
2.	Vocabulary Achievement	D2	24.95	5.26
		6 th semester	27.19	5.13
		S1	20.45	6.32
3.	Reading Comprehension Achievement	D2	13.86	2.24
		6 th semester	17.18	4.60
		S1	11.42	4.50
4.	Grammar Achievement	D2	5.52	3.46
		6 th semester	6.28	1.62
		S1	5.08	2.57

Table 3. Summaries of Students' Achievement Based on Teacher's ELT Experience

T's teaching experience	Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation
6 months	70	53.86	9.51
18 months	46	31.24	11.24
120 months	21	44.33	8.54
144 months	50	46.16	9.58
180 months	42	43.21	8.05

Table 4. Summaries of Students' Achievement Based on Students' SES

Students's SES	Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation
Blue-color workers	49	56.63	6.31
Farmers	7	55.46	3.15
Pedicab riders	12	50.75	7.69
Soldiers	4	45.76	12.61
Servants	31	45.42	8.93
Bricklayers	24	44.79	6.39
Public servants	19	43.95	11.01
Businessmen	29	43.34	9.66
Drivers	18	33.00	13.14
Private sector workers	19	32.00	10.56
Small traders	17	31.12	10.64

Table 5. Summaries of Students' Achievement Based on Students' Gender

Student's gender	Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	103	45.70	12.16
Female	126	44.08	12.56

*Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient of the Variables***Table 6. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients of the Variables Measured**

Variables		Correlation	p<
Student Achievement	Student SES	-.192	.004
	Teacher Education level	-.448	.000

Table 7. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients of the Sub-Variables Measured

Variables		Correlation	p<
SES	Vocabulary	-.130	.049
	Reading	-.241	.000
	Grammar	-.128	NS

*Mean Differences of Students' Achievement***Table 8. Mean Difference of Student Achievement Based on Teacher-Education Level**

Comparison of Teacher Education Level	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Level of Significance
S1 and D2	7.38	2.58	p<0.01
S1 and 6 th Semester	13.70	1.49	p<0.000
D2 and 6 th Semester	6.32	2.51	p<0.03

Table 9. Means of Students' Achievement Based on Students' SES

Students' SES	Mean of Total Achievements	Mean of Reading	Mean of Vocabulary	Mean of Grammar
Farmers	55.43	20.00	28.43	7.00
Blue-collar workers	56.63	19.84	29.92	6.88
Public servants	43.95	14.26	23.84	5.84
Small traders	31.12	8.53	18.59	4.00
Private sectors	32.12	9.86	17.21	4.95
Drivers	33.00	10.50	17.83	4.67
Soldiers	45.76	15.75	24.25	5.75
Bricklayers	44.79	13.96	24.79	6.04
Servants	45.42	14.84	25.10	5.48
Pedicab riders	50.75	16.75	27.25	6.75
Businessmen	43.34	13.62	24.41	5.31

Table 10. Mean Difference of Students' Achievement based on Students' SES

Comparison of Student Achievement Based on their SES		Mean Difference	Level of Significance
Farmers	Traders	24.31	.000
	Private sector workers	23.43	.000
	Private Drivers	22.43	.000
Blue-collar workers	Public servants	12.43	.000
	Small traders	25.52	.000
	Private sector workers	24.63	.000
	Private Drivers	23.63	.000
	Bricklayers	11.84	.000
	Servants	11.21	.000
	Businessmen	13.29	.000
Public servants	Traders	12.83	.001
	Private sector workers	11.95	.002
	Drivers	10.95	.011
Traders	Bricklayers	13.67	.000
	Servants	14.30	.000
	Pedicab drivers	19.63	.000
	Businessmen	12.23	.001
Private sectors	Bricklayers	12.79	.000
	Servants	13.42	.000
	Pedicab drivers	18.75	.000
	Businessmen	11.34	.001
Private Drivers	Bricklayers	11.79	.002
	Servants	12.42	.000
	Pedicab drivers	17.75	.000
	Businessmen	10.34	.007

Summaries of Dependent Variables from Independent Variables

Table 11. Summary Statistics for Predicting Students' EFL Achievement Variable from Age, Teacher Education Level, Teacher ELT Experience, and Students' SES

Model	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	R	R ²	F	P<
1	Teacher Education Level	A C H I E V E M E N T	.448	.201	57.106	.000
1	Student SES		-.192	.037	8.682	.004
2	Teacher Education level + Student SES		.522	.273	42.409	.000
2	Teacher Education level + Student SES + ELT Experience		.617	.381	46.088	.000
2	Teacher Education level + ELT Experience + Age		.642	.412	52.466	.000
2	Teacher Education level + Students' SES + ELT Experience + Age		.644	.415	39.704	.000

Based on the analysis, it is found that there is no statistical correlation between age and students' EFL achievement although in terms of means, the total achievement of those who start earlier in EFL learning is a little bit higher (Mean = 44.89; SD = 15.07) than that of older learners (Mean = 44.73; SD = 8.87). See Table 1. There is also no significant relationship between the teacher's ELT experience and students' EFL achievement.

However, there is a negative significant correlation between teacher-education level and their students' total achievement ($R = -.448$; $p < 0.01$). Judging from the means obtained by the two groups of students, it is found that there is a difference in terms of the three levels of teacher-education in relation to the total achievement of the students (See Table 7). There is also a significant correlation between students' achievement

in each component of EFL and their teacher education level. For example, there is a significant correlation between: vocabulary and teacher education ($R = -.443$; $p < 0.01$), reading comprehension and teacher education ($R = -.434$; $p < 0.01$), and grammar and teacher education level ($R = -.199$; $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that students, who are taught by the sixth-semester-student teachers got the highest mean (Mean = 50.65; SD = 10.24) compared to those who are taught by S1-graduate teachers (Mean = 36.95; SD = 11.49) in their total achievement. It is more shocking that those who are taught by D2-graduate teachers (Mean = 44.33; SD = 8.54) are even better than those who are taught by S1 graduates. In details judging from the language components, such as vocabulary, reading comprehension, and grammar, those who are taught by the sixth-semester-student teachers are better (Mean = 27.19, SD = 5.13; Mean = 17.18, SD = 4.60; Mean = 6.28, SD = 1.62) than those of D2 graduate teachers (Mean = 24.95, SD = 5.26; Mean = 13.86, SD = 2.24; Mean = 5.52, SD = 3.46) which is reasonable, but they are better than those whose teachers are S1 graduates (Mean = 20.45, SD = 6.32; Mean = 11.42, SD = 4.50; Mean = 5.08, SD = 2.57), which needs further explanation.

Based on the means above, it is found that there is a statistically significant difference of the students' achievements (elementary school vs. junior high school) as seen from their teacher education level. For example the difference between those who are taught by S1 graduate teachers and D2 graduate teachers is 7.38 ($p < 0.01$); the difference between those who are taught by S1 graduate teachers and semester-sixth-student teachers is 13.70 ($p < 0.001$); and the difference between those who are taught by D2 graduate teachers and semester-sixth-student teachers is 6.32 ($p < 0.03$). See Table 8

Furthermore, based on Table 7, it can be seen that there is also a negative significant correlation between students' SES and their achievement ($R = -.192$; $p < 0.004$). Based on the student SES of both levels of the schools, it is found that children of blue collar workers are on the first rank in the achievement followed by children of farmers, pedicab riders, soldiers, servants, bricklayers, public servants, businessmen, private sector workers, drivers, and small traders. A summary for the statistics for predicting their EFL achievement from teacher education level only and stu-

dent SES only, and or plus age and teacher ELT experience can be seen in Table 11. From table 1, it has been known that there is no statistical correlation between age only and students' EFL achievement ($R = -.007$; $F = .099$; $p < 0.921$). However, teacher education level alone and SES alone has significant correlation with student achievement, $R = .448$, $R^2 = .201$, $p < .000$ and $R = -.192$, $R^2 = .037$, $p < .004$ respectively. When these two factors are combined, then the correlation increased into $R = .552$, $R^2 = .273$, $p < .000$. After that, when ELT experience is added to these two factors, the correlation increases into $R = .617$, $R^2 = .381$, $p < .000$. Finally when these three factors are combined with age, there is a little increase in explained variation in the achievement of the students, $R^2 = .644$, $R^2 = .415$, $p < .000$.

DISCUSSION

Since the students come from different levels of education (Elementary Education vs. Junior High School Education), one would expect that there would be a difference in achievement of the students in terms of age (11 vs. 14, in which older students must have been better) at which English is introduced, intensity of instruction (2 hours vs. 4 hours), curriculum (local content which focuses on only vocabulary and oral reading vs. compulsory subject which focuses on the four skills of English including vocabulary and grammar). But the fact shows, no correlations found between age and those variables. This may be caused by the heterogeneity in age of the two groups of the students, that is, only age 11 and age 14. However, having no difference in achievement between those who start earlier but with less hours and those who start later but with more hours of time spent learning, suggests has showed that the younger the students start learning a foreign language, the better the achievement will be.

Then, the negative significant correlation between teacher education level and the English achievement of the students needs explanation. If education reflects the quality of the teacher, then its correlation and influence on the success of the children should be positive. The plausible reason for this is probably that there are two types of teachers—those who are permanent teachers and who have been teaching for quite a long time and those who are still students in the sixth semester of S1 program who only have ELT experience for more or less 6 months. Therefore, there is a

possibility that older teachers are somewhat "worn out" so that they are not creative any more and not well-prepared when teaching. They may not keep up with the new development in their field either, especially in the new methods and techniques of TEFL. Meanwhile, the younger teachers are those who are still fresh and are still very eager to apply new methods and techniques they have just learned from EYL class and use various materials and visual aids to make their teaching and learning process more interesting. This means that having higher level of education and having more years in ELT experience do not necessarily result in skilled teachers and eventually successful learners if the teachers do not brush up their knowledge and skills in their field.

The same is true for the mean difference among the students' achievement based on their SES. It seems that those who come from the lower class got higher achievement than those who are in the middle class status (See Tables 9 and 10).

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that (1) children who start earlier in EFL learning is better in EFL achievement than older learners. This is in line with Krashen, et al.'s finding that age is a significant factor to consider in one's EFL learning; (2) success in ELT cannot only be judged by the teacher education level and years of teaching experience but also from the actual process of teaching and learning in the classroom, that is the motivation and creativity of the teachers themselves in teaching; (3) success of the students in EFL learning, on the other hand, is not merely determined by the affluence of their parents. When the students are treated equally and with the teacher's enthusiasm in the teaching-learning process, this might make a more significant difference in students' achievement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, POLICY, AND/OR PRACTICE

The results of the present study will have some implications to the theory, policy, and practice of the English language teaching (ELT) in Indonesia. At least, it will be used as a recommendation to the Department of National Education of how to deal with the ELT programs in Indonesian schools. In terms of the theory of English language teaching (ELT), the findings of this study can give more support to the theory of English language teaching in that the early age serves as a decisive factor that

makes the foreign language learning successful. In other words, elementary pupils are better second language acquirers or foreign language learners compared to the older learners. In terms of the policy of ELT, the findings of this study can be used as a new consideration to make the English subject that has been taught to the fourth graders compulsory and/or even make it exposed students from the first grade of Elementary Schools. This means that it should be officially stated in the national curriculum as a compulsory subject. Although in general the analysis does not prove significant difference of the achievement of both groups of the students, still in terms of reading comprehension, 5th graders (mean = 14.72) are better than 8th graders (mean = 14.30) with an $F = 39.715$, $p < .01$. Also in terms of grammar, although there is no significant difference but the mean score obtained by the 5th graders (mean = 5.75) is higher than that of the 8th graders (mean = 5.58). Therefore, this study can enhance the more intense practice of English at schools and among children. In addition, it is advisable for the teachers of English to always keep up with the new developments of ELT by participating in workshops or seminars. However, in order to obtain more plausible results, further research must be done by including more schools (private and state schools) and all the four skills—Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing and adding Grammar, Vocabulary and Phonology to them. The research may deal in Topics, Functions, and Notions, describing language in terms of how it is used in communication rather than seeing it as a linguistic system or a set of skills.

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