

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Learning English in an early age is in fashion in Indonesia. In response to this, The Department of Educational and Culture has made regulation of English instruction as contained in the decree of the Minister of Education and Culture number 060/U/1993. English is included in the curriculum for the elementary level of education as one of the local content subjects from grade four to grade six (www.depdiknas.go.id)

English is taught in elementary school if the local community considers that English proficiency is considered necessary by students. Its curriculum content will be determined by the Provincial Office of the Department of Education and Culture (Huda 1999:135)

English is taught in elementary school based on the assumption that learning foreign language will be much easier at an early age. Hence young learners have a better chance to be successful in acquiring foreign language.

However, learning L2 at an early age is not the sole factor that would determine the success of language learning. Cook (1991) said besides age, interactions that learners have with the situation and with other people play an important role in language learning. Musthafa (2003) shared similar opinion; he said that there are many other factors that would determine the success of language learner such as exposure, support, engagement, teacher's confidence, capabilities, and sponsorship.

Since English is considered as a foreign language in Indonesia, thus classroom could be the only place where learners can internalize what they have learned. Hence,

teachers provide great contribution to the success of language learning. Teachers who teach young learners should have the knowledge of who children are and what should they do to facilitate children's learning.

Nevertheless, as reported by Suyanto (2004), most English teachers at elementary school were lack of competence to teach English to young learners. Similar findings emerged from research conducted by Suharno (2005) and Chodijah (2004). Those studies reveal that only few teachers comprehend the principles of teaching English to young learners.

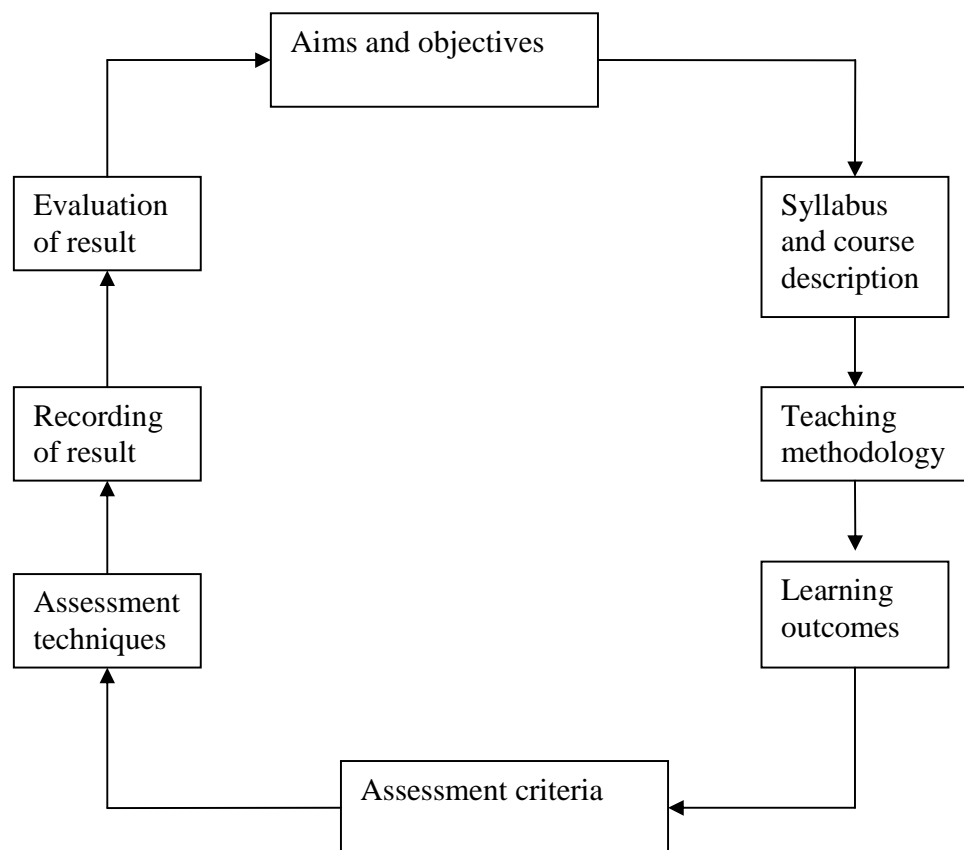
Lack of competence in teaching young learners would create many problems, one of the problems may deal with assessing the learners' ability in using English. The researcher found assessment as an interesting issue since assessment often plays a prominent role in the teaching and learning processes. The way teachers conduct assessment would affect young learners' motivation in learning language as Rixon (1992) said that it is assessment that become the focus of attention when it comes to evaluating the success of a teaching program. Brewster et.al (2003) reported that in some countries assessment becomes the most important part in instruction.

If teachers are lack of competence in teaching young learners, it can be assumed they are too lack of knowledge of assessing young learners. This study would focus on how assessment carried out at elementary school. Hopefully findings of this study would provide an insight of the process of assessment at elementary school. It is expected that this study would contribute lucid information of how assessment should be carried out, hence there will be improvement on the way teachers assess young learners

1.2 Rationale of the study

Teaching and learning require teachers to constantly gather information and make decision. In order to become “good decision makers” regarding instruction, teachers need to know how to assess young learners in the classroom. Thus, according to Gipps (2000) teaching, learning and assessment are inextricably interrelated as illustrated by the figure below:

Figure 1.1 The Teaching and Assessment Cycle



(Taken from Brewster et.al 2003: 247)

Assessment is part of teaching cycle as we can see from the above figure. It becomes the tool to provide information about areas to be improved in the teaching and

learning processes. In some contexts, assessment plays a very prominent role, that the way learners are taught and activities they do are influenced heavily by assessment.

Assessment is a systematic process of making decision towards particular matter. Related to language learning, the decision may concern students' performance and ability, as well as the degree of knowledge or skill (Hancock 1994). Thus assessment is not only restricted to testing. According to Brown (2004) testing is only a subset of assessment

However, a research conducted by Rea-Dickinson and Rixon (cited in Carter 2001) reveals that many teachers are still using language test as the sole instrument to assess young learners' ability in using English. The language test itself focused on grammar and vocabulary test in the form of multiple-choice and gap filling to assess young learners. Furthermore they said that this pencil and paper model (language testing in the form of multiple choice and gap filling or as Brown (2004) refers as traditional assessment) is considered to be counter productive for the development of young learners' language learning. Children may suffer from stress because of traditional assessment, it may also raise children's affective filter that eventually discouraged them from learning language (Carter 2001). Helm and Grondlund (1999) share similar opinion, they said that testing put a great pressure to young learners, which may decrease the accuracy of assessment.

Furthermore, they said that teaching does not only provide opportunity to learn knowledge and skills, but also develop attitudes towards learning and applying those skills. Thus assessment may influence young learners' motivation and interest. Early experience may contribute to the continuity of learning language (Cameron 2001). It is

essential that teachers be sensitive towards young learners' feelings and emotions; they should construct and foster young learners' enjoyment in studying foreign language.

Using pencil and paper model as the sole tool to assess young learners is incompatible with the basic principle of teaching young learners. Based on young learners' characteristics, they learn through songs, games, chants, etc.(Harmer 2001). Thus it is inappropriate to assess them with pencil and paper test model. As Hughes (2004) said that "assessment would be the way of the same type of activities that the learners are involved in the L2 class"

Consequently teachers should select an appropriate tool to assess young learners. Shaaban (2000) said that well-designed assessment is crucial to the evaluation of students' progress, teaching effectiveness, and the suitability of program and materials. In learning a language, students acquire the disposition to use the skills and strategies, as well as the knowledge of how to apply them, which is the target of assessment. Thus more meaningful assessment is required.

Since traditional assessment is considered to be incompatible, thus educators are turning to alternative methods as tool for educational reforms. The alternative methods are variously called as alternative assessment, authentic assessment or performance-based assessment (Dietel et.al 1991).

Activities in alternative assessment are in the form of portfolio, dialog journal, self-assessment, etc. Alternative assessment emphasizes on assessment as a process not product. Alternative assessment would provide a more accurate measurement of students' achievement since it gauges learners' ability from various perspectives

Prior to this study, the researcher conducted observation towards teachers five elementary schools. The data revealed that the purpose of teachers' assessment were to identify students' strength and weaknesses and to gain data for the record book. Assessment activities cover formative and summative test. Teachers' observation applying norm-referenced is also one of the tools of assessment. This study aims to get a vivid picture of assessment for young learners. The researcher would like to investigate how assessment carried out by English teachers at elementary school.

1.3 Research statement

This study focuses on how language assessment carried out by teachers in elementary school. The following questions will guide the study.

1. What are teachers' understandings towards language assessment for young learners
 - a. What is (are) the purpose(s) of teachers' assessment?
 - b. What aspects of language do teachers assess?
 - c. How would teachers give feedback?
2. What techniques do teachers employ in assessing young learners?
3. What are difficulties encountered by teachers during assessment process?

1.4 Aims of the study

The purpose of the study is to identify how teachers carried out assessment for young learners. The aims of this study will be elaborated as follow:

1. to identify teachers' understanding towards assessment
2. to identify techniques employed by teachers in assessing young learners
3. to identify difficulties encountered by teachers during assessment process

1.5 Clarification of terms

1. Assessment refers Assessment is a systematic process of making decision towards particular matter. Related to language learning, the decision may concern students' performance and ability, the degree of knowledge or skill.
2. Traditional assessment refers to pencil and paper assessment. In the process students are assessed of what they know about the language
3. Alternative assessment refers to the way of assessing take into account variation in students' needs, interests and learning styles; and they attempt to integrate assessment and learning activities

1.6 General approach to the study

Relevant to the nature, the aims of the study and the statement of the problem above, this study will employ a qualitative research design. As Wiersma (cited in Sook 2003) said that “qualitative research investigates the complex phenomena experienced by the participants by examining people’s words and actions in descriptive ways”.

The aim of the study is to give a portrayal of how teachers carried out assessment for young learners. Therefore this study employs descriptive method (Jackson 1995). In general, the methodology of data collection in this study relied on questionnaires, interviews and observations.

1.7 Significance of the study

This study would provide an insight of how young learners should be assessed. Findings of the study would give empirical evidence of the way English teachers carried out assessment at elementary school. As such, the result of this study hopefully makes teachers aware of crucial things in assessing young learners, thus assessment would help learning instead of working against it.

1.8 An overview of the study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One mainly discussed the reason and the purpose of the study. It presents the background of the study, the aims of the study and research questions, the general approach, the significance of the study and overview.

Some concepts adopted for the study is discussed on Chapter Two. This chapter also discusses previous studies undertaken by others on similar issues.

The third chapter explains the way the researcher carried out this study. It covers the research site, the participants and methodology.

Chapter Four contains the analysis and findings of the data collected. It later discusses what findings mean for the purpose of the study based on the data collection and related literature. It attempts to answer all the questions presented in Chapter One.

The finding and discussion is concluded in Chapter Five. This Chapter also presents some recommendations and suggestions to improve the quality of assessment for young learners.

