

# Challenges of becoming a teacher of English

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A father has this story to tell. Once, his daughter spoke in English and asked him to solve the mathematical equation "two rivers two". Confused, the father just urged his daughter to translate her question into Bahasa Indonesia and the child did. "Dua kali dua, sama dengan berapa?" asked the daughter.

Disappointed, the father then talked to his daughter's teacher and found out that the teacher literally translated the Indonesian word *kali* into river in teaching her students how to do multiplication.

This story may sound funny, but it reflects how some students are wrongly taught by teachers still struggling in English. It's a reality that a number of Indonesian teachers make lots of grammatical mistakes when they use English in teaching their students. Consider this sentence written by an Indonesian teacher: "In piano class, Esther have improvement in her performance, and with regular practicing and put confident will make her performance even more better".

Another Indonesian teacher wrote these comments: "Clara is always willing to participate in classroom activities and intrinsically volunteering in the classroom routines such as be a prayer leader. Her motor skills well developing as well as fine motor school. She is able to hold pencil, brush properly. Her hand writing is need. Clara is able to stay on tasks and finished her task on time."

Just imagine the disappointment and anxiety by parents when they read or hear such sentences. How can



students learn to use correct English when their teachers don't know how? This is one of the problems when teachers with limited English proficiency are asked to use English as a medium of instruction. These teachers may have the educational degrees, but they are not competent in teaching their subjects in English. Educational degrees, though important, do not necessarily correlate with English language competence.

In Indonesia, English is considered the first foreign language and not many people can speak the language. According to Indonesian linguist Soenjono Dardjowidjojo, this can be attributed to the fact that Indonesia was not ruled long enough by an English speaking country. It was the Dutch that played a major role in the colonial history of Indonesia. For over 350 years, Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch, who arrived as traders in 1595 and stayed until the country gained its independence in 1945. British occupation in Indonesia was so brief that it left no remarkable traces. The enforcement of Bahasa Indonesia as the national language has also diminished Indonesia's ability to use English, which has become more and more indis-

pensable.

Since English is taught indiscriminately and incorrectly in some schools in the country, a number of Indonesian parents do send their children to English courses mostly conducted by native speakers after school hours. However, we have to remember that there are many varieties of English. It's not only American English and British English that are being used out there. There are many types of English – native and non-native, Western and non-Western. Besides American English and British English, we have other English varieties such as Australian English, Canadian English, New Zealand English, Philippine English, Indian English, and Singaporean English. English has become so pervasive that it is no longer proper to talk about one English – either American or British English.

It's no doubt that English has become the common linguistic ground. Whether you're an Indonesian studying in Australia, an Indian businessman wanting to invest in Singapore, or a Thai teacher attending a workshop in Malaysia, you are likely to speak English. According to studies, non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers. Here in Indonesia, English language institutions are mushrooming and English language skills have been identified by the Pendidikan Network in Indonesia as one of the two important issues that everyone has to work on. On its website, the Pendidikan Network even promotes the reading of *The Jakarta Post* newspaper. "If you read one article from *The Jakarta Post* everyday you will certainly see some improvements," goes a line from the



JP/Anthony Dea

A mother assists her daughter in solving a problem pertaining to a mandatory subject in which she has lost interest.

Pendidikan Network.

Due to the importance of English worldwide, many parents want their children to learn the language. But how can children improve their English proficiency when the teachers themselves need help? How can teachers also transfer knowledge and concepts to their students if they are not competent in the language they are required to use? This is one aspect that needs to be looked at in the education system of Indonesia.

In teaching in English, teachers should model the use of the language correctly. One

principle in language learning is that children learn by imitation. They parrot the language uttered by adults. This reminded me of my daughter. When my daughter was four years old, she kept on using "must to". She did say "I must to go to school" and "I must to eat healthy food". Later I found out that she picked up the use of "must to" from her teacher.

Thus, it is important that teachers teaching their subjects in English are proficient in the language. If they don't have the language competence, they should take the initiative to improve their

English language skills. They can do this the same way students learn the language. Reading English books such as *Common Mistakes in English* and other print materials is one of them. Other ways of improving English skills include watching English programs or films and participating in English discussions. Constant practice and reflection are also necessary.

If schools want their teachers to teach in English correctly, they should also provide them with necessary support such as comprehensive training and a mentor. In his

book titled *An A to Z of School Leadership*, George Walker wrote that learning is what schools are for, and learning is what school leaders must lead.

Walker, however, argued that both the employer and the employee have a shared commitment in making the employment a success. So it's not the responsibility of the teachers alone to make some improvements and rise up to the challenge.

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