

## **FOSTERING SOFT-SKILLS THROUGH CONTEXTUAL-BASED ACTIVITIES AT THE INTERNATIONAL PRIMARY SCHOOL**

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### **Abstract**

This article brings up the importance of soft-skills for language learning. It starts from a principle that the main holistic aim of language education is to make learners be smart and right. To be smart, they have to achieve the English proficiency/ competence. To be right, they have to be able to foster some necessary soft-skills to maximize their English performance. This paper suggests that the improvement of soft-skills be conducted in English classes through a series of activities. The activities include fostering motivation to learn English, perseverance to practice English, and strategies to use English. The primary English teachers should integrate these elements into their English lessons. In addition, the paper also emphasizes that the primary English teachers have to walk the talk as the role models so that their learners trust them and feel motivated to adopt the desired values willingly.

**Key-words:** soft-skills, cultural-based activities, English competence, and role model

### **Introduction**

Numerous empirical studies have shown significant correlation between affective factors (soft- skills) and language proficiency (language skills as hard-skills). Therefore, the language proficiency / competence in the integrated language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, seems affected by soft-skills, such as values that energize the language skills. Soft-skills/ values, such as motivation and perseverance could become the effective energizers of the language proficiency. In a language learning research, Sadtono once mentioned (in his lecture) that motivation and perseverance (these soft-skills) could contribute 33% variance of the language learning success and besides, other variances like intelligence 20%, attitude 33% and 14% others factors, such as learning strategies, learning styles, and others. Fostering explicit values/soft skills enhances the learner proficiency in language learning. In this paper, the writer did a preliminary survey at an international primary school in Surabaya, Indonesia to identify the language learning problems and to see the possibilities of integrating values/soft- skills into the language learning to enhance the language proficiency. The writer also helped design the soft-skills / values / character building of an international primary school in Surabaya, Indonesia, besides, he also observed the implementation of the soft-skills. The writer also conducted some interviews with English teachers of the school. From his survey, the writer could conclude that the implementation of the soft-skills was still separated from the curriculum meaning the soft-skills / values were not yet integrated into the subjects, including English subject. When the writer asked about the soft-skills values needed for learning English, the primary English teachers



replied that many students had no high motivation and a bit lack of perseverance in language learning. At the international primary school in non English-speaking countries, English is used as the medium of instruction and considered as a second language. Besides English, the international learners in Indonesia (as a multicultural country) might also use other languages, such as their mother tongue as their national language or other local languages. They also learn a foreign language, such as Chinese.

### **Soft skills for language learning**

Soft-skills for language learning mean some necessary values needed for learning English as second language at the International Primary School in non English-speaking countries. The values needed for learning a second / foreign language could be the motivation or passion to learn, the learning perseverance, including the effort, hard work, diligence, and persistence to learn, and the learning strategies to use the language. Again, Sadtono explained (in his lecture) that motivation and perseverance could contribute 33% variance of the language learning success and other factors (14% of it), such as learning strategies. These soft-skills or values mentioned above could enhance the learners language proficiency / competence. It is expected that the school program/ activities can also foster some soft-skills/ values, such as motivation, perseverance, tolerance, care, respect, responsibility, teamwork, and creativity to enhance the English language learning.

### **Problem of the language learning at the International primary school**

At the International primary school in non English-speaking countries, English as second language becomes the medium of instruction. The learners usually interact with other members of the school (teachers, principal, peers, administration) in English. The total immersion program conducted in English is needed and conducted in that school. As a matter of fact, the Indonesian learners who study at the International school also use their own mother tongues - Indonesian or any other local languages ( Ethnologue at [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com), has identified 726 languages in Indonesia out of 6,909 known living languages of the world ). They may also learn Chinese as a foreign language at school. There are also some foreign learners who learn at the International school, so English might be their first language. It is different from the local learners at the International school who acquire their language competence mostly from the classroom setting. In the classroom setting, the classroom learning environment could hinder or foster the English language development of the learners. In other words, the conducive school environment could enhance the learner competence in language learning. As a matter of fact, teachers of the International primary school in Indonesia might use their world of Englishes for they are also foreign and local teachers who still use English with their own accents. Therefore, it is important for the International school to create classrooms as the conducive language learning environment. In order to create them, the learners have to make use English at the classrooms and the school environment for acquiring their language competence but sometimes they prefer to use their first languages. All members of the school, such as teachers, principal, administrators, learners, and other educators sometimes do not follow the total immersion program to use English in their daily activities at school. To follow the total immersion program to use English, all of them should have strong commitments to use English at school, although some of them prefer to speak their own mother tongues. It is important to use English in their daily activities, such as meetings, socialization for they might learn their best from the school environment.



**Language learning motivation**

It is known that motivation and perseverance have a great influence in the language learning. Tomlinson and Masubara (2004:2) also states that learners only learn what they really need or want to learn. Wang (2006) also explains that the motivated learners are usually more active in learning while the unmotivated ones are more likely to cause classroom disturbances. Based on these two ideas above, it is important the teachers have to think how to motivate/ energize the unmotivated learners in language learning and in what ways teachers could meet the learners' needs to satisfy their needs of learning. In another survey (December 2009), when the writer asked the respondents (learners) what factors that made them enjoy learning English at school, they replied that they enjoyed learning English were due to some factors, such as learning materials (57% of the respondents), learning atmosphere (53%), and delivery method (50%). Therefore, teachers should prepare at least these three motivated tools in order to help encourage the learners to learn English effectively and joyfully. Moreover, learning materials, such as texts could also play a very important role in learning English. Texts should be chosen to engage learners to develop motivation and appreciation of the reading rewards. Another motivated way of learning is giving feedback. Feedback (Lewis,2002:4) could also be a kind of motivation for it can be more motivating than marks or grades.

**Contextual-based activities to foster Soft-skills**

Contextual-based activities should challenge the learners to learn English best in learner contexts. The activities must develop the learner English competence and relate the learner real world – their knowledge, skills, insight, emotions as well as cultural and social contexts. Before the teachers as the facilitators of language learning think about the contextual-based activities that foster the soft-skills, they have to decide the activities at least with the following considerations, such as the learning objectives, the learners' competence level, the learners' needs/interest, challenging learning materials, and delivery method (such as joyful learning approach). The learners must learn English through the activities in their contexts, for example, procedure text ( one of the text types) could be demonstrated in the real situation in class/ at school, such as how to make tea, how to make an omelet, or how to make fried rice/ noodle. First the learners have to decide the purpose/ aim of the activity, second, prepare the materials/ ingredients, and third, demonstrate the procedure in the correct steps. They learn by doing this activity that help them to learn at least four language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing while doing their fun/ challenging activity. The teacher guides/ facilitates their learning and gives some feedback on their language skills. This activity that involve the learners' five senses and emotion (feeling happy, worried, excited, etc.) may foster their soft-skills, such as motivation to learn English in exciting/ attractive ways. The other activities, such as role-playing, writing English songs, writing English poems, story-telling could also provide some living values/ soft-skills. Long in Scarcella et al (1990) suggests that group works allow more learners to talk since in small groups several learners can talk at the same time without disturbing others and practice more communicative functions of the language in the second language classrooms. When the learners in small groups are asked to perform in certain contexts, such as conversational actions at supermarkets, banks, restaurants, etc., they take a part actively in the role-play that may create certain value problems. Each group has to write the dialog and present it in front of the class. Their performance would get appreciation from their peers and teacher. The teacher ask them to reflect on their performance and mention the value learnt, such as motivation, honesty, responsibility, care, love, respect, tolerance, and others. The other ways to express their feelings through songs and poems. Many primary learners may also love to sing.



They could change the words of the known English songs with their own English words after visiting/ observing the orphanage home, seeing a film with good educational values, or other valuable learning situations. Such activities might improve the learners' English competence as well as strengthen their soft-skills/ values. And the values that are strengthened and appreciated by the teacher and peers or others may energize their spirit of learning English. Anyhow, the activities could be the curricular, the co-curricular or the extra-curricular ones. Clayton North Primary school has the multicultural kitchen garden as the co-curricular activity as the authentic learning opportunity to build knowledge and life-skills. The multicultural kitchen garden and cooking programs integrate values in all areas of the curriculum. These programs are encourage to impart values in the physical, cultural, and social learning environment. Such similar programs could also be done in some International primary schools of non English- speaking countries as one activity of the immersion program to enhance the language learning as well as foster the soft-skills including to raise the multicultural awareness and to learn similarities and differences.

### **Strategies to foster soft-skills**

Strategies to foster soft-skills/ values at school are important to consider. The strategies that the writer once used to establish the values system of an International primary school are done in some steps. First, all the members of the school (school-boards, school management, teachers, administrations, learners, parents and others working at the school) have to understand the vision and mission including the core values of the school. They should also have their belief and strong commitment to implement the school value system. A survey is also needed to see the readiness of the school to plan, implement, evaluate, and report the effectiveness of the value education practice of the school. In the values system, commitment and readiness of all the members of the school are very crucial. Without strong commitments, they could not expect their effective values education practice of the school. Moreover, the soft-skills/ values as the affective component of the school system start with value knowing, value feeling, and value doing. Therefore, knowledge, emotion, attitude, actions/ activities are important for the learners to learn and practice certain values. For example, the English teachers as the facilitators/ the front liners of the values have to plan some activities (actions) that the learners have to do in language learning. The activities/ actions could be as one of the strategies to foster certain values/ soft-skills. Certain good values practice can be repeated in different activities of the language learning so that the learners may acquire good value habit that enhances their language learning development. Further if the value habit obtained by all members of the school, certain values may become the positive school culture that enhance the language learning development of the school community. To implement all, the teachers have to play an important role at least as the role model of the school values. For example, when the teachers expect their learners enable to use English well at school, they also have to be the good model. Furthermore, the teachers and the other key persons in charge should pay attention on the monitoring and evaluation system of the values/ soft-skills by doing observation, collecting and analyzing data of the values implementation and reflection. The feedback from the results of the monitoring and evaluation process is important for the continuous improvement of the school values system. For this purpose, the teachers can do the classroom action research of the implementation of the values / soft-skills in their classroom level for further improvement of the school values cycles. To strengthen the learners' value practice in class, the teachers could also use the verbalizing feelings of appreciation. When they see the positive change of the learners' soft-skills and or hard-skills in their language learning, for example, the teacher can verbalize his/ her feelings to the learners who make the improvement by saying "I'm very happy to know your



well-done composition. Thank you for your continuous effort to practice it" This brief statement helps the learner strengthen his/ her learning perseverance. The other strategy the teacher could consider is the environmental factor (Carreira, 2006) that helps learners remain engaged in doing the language learning activities their best. It is also important to connect the activities in the classroom with those in the real world. Moreover, it is also important to promote activities that challenging but reasonable with the learners' competence level. The strategy for successful language learning also depends on how the English teachers use the learning materials, delivery method, and create the conducive learning atmosphere.

### Conclusion

Soft-skills / values for language learning, such as motivation and perseverance contribute 33% variance of the language learning success, besides other factors, such as learning strategies, learning styles, and others contribute 14% variance of the language learning success. As a matter of fact, English as a second language becomes the medium of instruction at the International primary school in non English-speaking countries, such as in Indonesia so that the English immersion program is done in that school. The learners of the International primary school that are not from the English-speaking families expect to acquire the English communicative competence from the classroom setting. Therefore, it is important for the school to create conducive language learning environment so that such learners could develop their English competence. From the survey, the writer finds out the problems of motivation and perseverance of the International primary school learners. To foster the soft-skills/ values, the teachers have to facilitate the learners learning by preparing contextual-based activities. Soft-skills / values could be planned/ designed, implemented, monitored, evaluated and reported the effectiveness of the values education practice of the school so that the learners gain the knowledge, attitudes, and activities that enable them to practice certain values. In order to become effective school-value system, all the members of the school should have commitments to implement the values by themselves and to be the model / example ('walk the talk') for their learners. The classroom action research could also be used to develop the value education practice at school. Finally the teachers could also strengthen the positive change of the learners in the language learning by expressing appreciation.

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