

An Indonesian Child Learning Sentence Construction

Santi Chairani Djonhar
(djonharsanti@yahoo.com)

University of Muhammadiyah Prof. DR. HAMKA (UHAMKA), Jakarta

This study investigates the language acquisition of an Indonesian child (a boy, aged 6 years) who learns and uses English (in Indonesia/Jakarta) inside and outside the classroom. This child regularly watches his favorite English movies such as *Disney Channel* and *Nickelodeon* from cable TV, and he frequently communicates in English at home, particularly with his only younger brother and mother. The data were collected for 18 months by recording his spontaneous speech. The data were transcribed then analyzed to see the development of his English syntactic constructions: i.e. infinitival and sentential complements. These types of constructions are chosen to investigate since it is not always easy for EFL learners to learn these constructions. The findings of this study show that the development of these constructions is enormous: the process of his learning English can be similar (if not the same) to that of English Children. It is because this child and the English children basically share common principles (sufficient exposure to and practices of English) of learning the language.

Keywords: child's foreign language development, language acquisition, sentence construction

Studi ini meneliti pemerolehan bahasa anak laki-laki (6 tahun) Indonesia yang belajar bahasa Inggris di dalam dan di luar kelas. Anak tersebut secara teratur menonton film favoritnya, seperti Disney Channel dan Nickelodeon, melalui kabel TV dan berkomunikasi di rumah, khususnya dengan adik laki-laki dan ibunya. Data dikumpulkan dalam waktu 18 bulan dengan merekam ucapan spontan-nya. Ucapan tersebut diketik dan dianalisa untuk melihat perkembangan konstruksi sintaksis bahasa Inggrisnya, yaitu 'infinitival dan sentential complements'. Konstruksi ini diteliti karena tidak mudah bagi pembelajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing untuk mempelajarinya. Penemuan studi ini menunjukkan bahwa perkembangan pemerolehan konstruksi ini sangat luar biasa: proses pemerolehan bahasa Inggris oleh anak dari negara yang tidak berbahasa Inggris sama dengan pemerolehan bahasa Inggris oleh anak yang tinggal di negara berbahasa Inggris. Ini karena anak Indonesia tersebut dan anak-anak di negara

berbahasa Inggris memiliki kesamaan dalam belajar bahasa (ekspose dan praktik berbicara yang memadai dalam bahasa tersebut).

INTRODUCTION

In more than two decades the national-plus schools have been mushrooming, and in Jakarta the number of this schools amounts to one hundred (Wiradji, 2006). The schools usually use English and Indonesian as medium of instruction. The subject of this study is a boy, named Rayesha. Rayesha, who is usually called Ray, lives with his Indonesian parents and his older brother, Narendra. Rayesha and Narendra go to an elementary school, a national-plus school in South Jakarta. The school uses English and Indonesian as the medium of instruction, and the ratio of use between these two languages is approximately 70% English and 30% Indonesian. In addition, all extracurricular activities such as swimming, baseball, and arts are conducted in English. Practically, students in this school use English actively inside and outside the classroom (school).

At school, almost all subjects in the school curriculum are taught in English. Nara actively uses English inside and outside school since he is placed in an environment where people in this school community such as peers, teachers, school administrators, and school staff use English as the language for communication. It happens to be that Rayesha does not have friends at his age in his neighborhood, and he does always meet his cousins and other relatives who speak Indonesian. So, by chance, the subject rarely speaks Indonesian in his home environment; quite often he speaks English with his mother and older brother at home, while he speaks Indonesian with his father. Rayesha's hobbies are reading English books on history and animals and watching his favorite English programs, i.e. quizzes, cartoon movies, and other movies for kids on English Channels such as Disney Channel and Nickelodeon.

In this case, Rayesha is an active learner and user of English since he not only learns and uses English in the classroom but also uses the language outside the school and home environment. He feels the need to speak English most of the time, and this condition may enhance the process of learning English. Foley and Thompson (2003) and Moon (2000) state that children in EFL setting may also enhance their learning of a foreign language as long as they live in a "community" where people in that community use English actively and these children feel comfortable in learning and using the language.

Foreign Language Acquisition and Its Impacts on Foreign Language Learning

The major difference between a second language and a foreign language is just a setting where the language is acquired or learned. Second language is a language learned in a native speaking country whereas a foreign language is a language learned in a foreign language setting or in an environment where people in that community do not use the language. But does this always mean the amount of foreign language learned is limited? Let's see the linguists' view on this particular phenomenon. Ellis (1994) asserts that the setting is not that important. According to him, language learning much depends on "... what is learnt and how is learnt". Littlewood (1984) and Moon (2000) have some notions that language learners can acquire a second language naturally since the language plays an institutional and social role in the community. They further state that even children or learners in a foreign language setting may learn the language as long as people in that environment use English and they (children or learners) are provided with linguistic inputs and given opportunities to use the language in this favorable learning situation. The process of these children's or learners' language acquisition can be similar to that of second language (L2) learners (Littlewood, 1984; Moon, 2000).

Language acquisition is the most captivating phenomenon which has intrigued many linguists and psycholinguists to conduct research on the process of how children learn language (Dardjowidjojo, 2000). For example, how they learn words and put them together in meaningful sentences and how they go on developing complex grammatical sentences. The end result of this process of this 'linguistic development' is commonly referred to as 'language acquisition', and it actually contains grammatical rules which enable children to speak and understand a language (Lightfoot, 1999; Menyuk, 1988; O'Grady, 1997; Whan-Cho & O'Grady, 1997). For decades many scholars such as Lindfors (1980), Lightbown and Spada, 1993), Wortham (1994), and Hoff (2001) produced a series of theories to account for it. These children learn language in their community: the behaviorists, innatists, and interactionists.

The behaviorists believe that the child's mind at birth is like a blank slate (Hoff, 2001; Dardjowidjojo, 2000). Language is learned entirely from experience. Unlike the behaviorists, Chomsky (1965) developed innateness theory claiming that children are biologically programmed for language. They have a special gift for learning the language. This language device is called Language Acquisition Device (LAD), and later this innate endowment is referred to as Universal Grammar (UG). UG consists of a set of principles common to all languages (i.e. subject, verb, and object) and language parameters. For example, in some

languages like Indonesian, the word order in sentences is SVO (subject, verb, object), while in Japanese it is SOV (Finegan & Bresnier, 1989). Children do not need to learn rules which are innate but their task is only to set the value expressed by the language in their environment (Guasti, 2002). In other words, the task of a child acquiring language is to select the appropriate values of parameters specified by UG (Guasti, 2002; Hoff, 2001).

Certain conditions are crucial to activate UG so that the children's learning a language can take place. There are important features of children that can trigger the language device. Firstly, children are social beings; they need to actively and continuously interact with people in their environment, such as their parents, siblings, peers, and teachers. This way they gain exposure to and opportunities to use the language.

The second condition is that children always need opportunities to use the language as much as possible since early childhood. This way they are able to actively experiment or control the linguistic inputs that they get from their surroundings (Lindfors, 1980; Moskowitz, 1978; Tomasello, 2003). Finally, early in life, children have the 'need' to communicate to express, for example, what they feel, what they want, and what they like to respond to what they hear or experience. So, to enhance their speech, children need a speaking community starting from a small scope like home and neighborhood environment and a wider scope like school and other outside world environment (Lindfors, 1980; Moon, 2000).

The theory on how children acquire a language is based on an interactionist's view in which it asserts that language develops because of the interaction between linguistic environment and children innate capacities (Lightbown & Spada, 1994). Lightbown and Spada (1994) claim that a supportive environment with conversational contexts provided by proficient speakers results in higher levels of language development. However, mere exposure to the language such as watching TV is not sufficient for learning complex structures and application of language (Hoff, 2001; Wortham, 1994). Children need to actively participate in language acquisition by, for example, involving themselves in the interaction. This is not a difficult task for them since basically they are not passive receptors.

Despite the fact that there have been a lot of disputes regarding the critical period hypothesis in language learning (Bialystok, 1977; Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Hoff, 2001; Johnson and Newport, 1991; Lenneberg, 1967; Long, 1990; Patskowski, 1990; Pinker, 1994), a critical period in learning a second language does exist; children are at their prime time to learn languages in addition to their native language (Guasti, 2002; Hakuta, 2001, Hoff, 2001; Laughlin, 1984; Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Long, 1990). The important thing is how

children can benefit from the condition in learning a second language. Children can truly benefit learning a second language as long as they are exposed to the language and are given opportunities to use the language in the environment where the language is spoken such as reading a lot of English books, watching English movies, and actively using English with peers, teachers at schools and people in their home environment (Brown, 2001; Foley and Thompson, 2003; Littlewood, 1984; Moon, 2000). Moreover, children who start learning a second language at the early age may be capable of gaining a native-like proficiency.

Empirical research on the acquisition of English as a foreign language is frequent. However, it can be assumed that there are some liable facets or conditions in which children's processes in learning the first, second, and foreign language are similar (if not the same) since they have innate capacity (i.e. UG) to learn languages and are at their prime time in learning languages. They are social beings; this enables them to participate actively in the language environment if these children are placed in the environment where they can be exposed to the language and have opportunities to use the language.

There have been several studies conducted on the development of sentences constructions of English (Diessel, 2004; Guasti, 2001; O'Grady, 1997; Tomasello, 2003). These studies primarily focus on how English children construct words into sentences: simple to complex ones. Most of these studies use one, two, and three subjects, and they are a longitudinal study. It usually takes six months to three years. Studies on the development of English as a second language are quite a few; one of the studies is conducted by Hakuta (1974, 1976) who investigated the language chunks of his daughter's English.

The empirical research on the acquisition of English as a foreign language is quite rare, particularly in Indonesia. This study therefore investigates how an Indonesian child who lives in Indonesia acquires English. Unlike other children who learn and use English in the classroom in only a few hours a week, the subject of this study learns and uses English inside and outside the classroom most of the time. In other words, he (the subject) uses English as a means of communication with people in his school and home environment.

The objective of this study is whether his English learning adopts the universal principles of language acquisition as they are applied to English or not. There is a subsidiary question pertinent to the objective of this study: how this child develops his complex sentences, i.e. infinitival and sentential complements, relative clauses, passives, and conjoined-clause constructions.

METHOD

This study is in the area of language acquisition; it is based on a substantial naturalistic corpus of spontaneous speech on one subject learning English in Indonesia. The subject's speech was audio-recorded in 18 months, starting from 6.1 to 7.7 years old. When the data were taken, he was in the first going to the second grade of elementary national-plus school in Jakarta. The recording of his speech was mostly taken at home and other places such as swimming pool, base-ball court, and taken during the trips to places like Malang, Bandung, and Malaysia. The data were taken by-weekly during the weekends.

As a participant observer, the researcher spent the weekends at the subject's house and did the recording of his speech when he communicated with his brother, mother, grandfather, and the researcher. Being a self-recording operator, the researcher was always present when the recording was made. She made use of her presence to take notes of all information that might be needed for data analysis. The transcribing was done right after the recording was made to have an accurate data possible. During the period of 18 months, each sentence construction under this study was analyzed to see how the child developed the complex sentence constructions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The earliest complex sentences involving to-infinitives that English speaking children learn and use are sentences that use matrix *wanna* + V, *hafta* + V, *gotta* + V, *needta* + V, and *gonna* + V. Nara also used these matrix verbs in his speech like *I wanna play, you hafta request, I gotta search the entire island, and I needta talk to Mom*. Unlike English children, Ray produced complex sentences involving wh-infinitival and sentential complements at the same time. He also developed a number of *wh*-infinitives just like the subject in Hakuta (1976) study, for example, *I know what to do, I teach myself how to make boomerang*. Later, he used matrix clause *I know* with other infinitive phrases starting with other question words other than *what* and *how* such as in *I know where to go, I know who to see*.

Later, Ray could produce complex sentences involving other matrix verbs think, guess, mean, wish, hope, say, and see. For example, *I think I'm going to die, I thought I left it, I guess, I lose, I mean baby pokemon not grow up, I wish I know, I wish you were reptile, I hope I can find this, Ayah said I can play anytime, See there is a wild goat*. At the end of this study, Rayesha could produce a complement that involves matrix promise, like *I promise you to speak English and you can record me*.

Children up to the age of nine still misinterpret utterances employing the semantic principle or what Chomsky calls Minimal Distance Principle (MDP) in which the subject of infinitive phrase *to speak English* is the closest NP *you* not *I*. In addition, Nara at this stage could produce complex sentences using matrix verbs *forget, look, remember, believe, seem, wonder, bet, and mind* like in *I forget today is Monday, Look what you have done, Remember you are the judge, I can't believe his eyes are fierce, It seems that you have to be on your own, I'm wondering If I can ask for help, I bet he is, D'you mind if I watch this?*

Relative clauses are problematic for English children; they have difficulties forming what some authors (MacWhinny, 1999; Slobin, 1973; Tomasello, 2003; Tavakolian, 1981) call as center embedded clauses, for example, clauses that modify subject, like in *The man **who stole my car** ran away*. The earliest relative clauses that Ray produced were not center-embedded clauses like in *I'll get anything I want*. Like most English children, Ray also made some errors in constructing relative clauses. He missed the relative pronouns in most utterances that involved relative clauses like in *This is Jeff in here is taping from the ball contest*. Later he could use center-embedded clauses in his speech. It is used as dependent clauses to respond to questions, like in Q: *Who is punk, Ray?* R: *Somebody **who gives money to the bully***.

The earliest relative clauses produced by children were a 'presentational relative constructions' (Diessel, 2004; Tomasello, 2003) which are formulaic and consist of pronominal subjects *That, This, There, and It*. Nara also produced such kind of relative clauses in his speech like in *This is professor Oak who give Pokeball, This is where I found Gym Leader, There was a witch who eats the girl*. In this process, Ray produced a number of embedded clause constructions like in *Everyone who has ticket will meet Crabby, the clown*. He even could produce relative phrases using present or past participles in his speech like in *The big wave **coming** destroyed the castle, There is a guy **named** Max Salome*.

English children are quite late in producing passive constructions (Dardjowidjojo, 2000; O'Grady, 2005). Like English children, Ray did not produce many passive constructions in his speech. The stages of the development of passives in Ray speech are similar to those of English children. At the first stage, Ray produced passive constructions involving the verb *get* like in *The earth suddenly get destroyed*, auxiliary verb *be*, like in *Nobody's invited*, then the use of modal verb *can* and *will* like in *You can't be scared, You'll be saved*. By-passive constructions are found in Ra's speech like in *The world is built by creator called Pokemon*. In later development, Ray produced passive constructions using

various tenses past tense and present perfect tense like in *I have to shoot before we were trapped, I've been totally distracted.*

There are two ways to construct complex constructions: those that involve coordination in which two independent clauses are linked in an equal manner and those that involve subordination, in which one clause (a subordinate clause) is to modify another clause (a main clause). However, the distinction between coordination and subordination is not so clear for young children (Tomasello, 2003). What children understand is there are clauses that are integrated, typically with connectives, to form conjoined-clauses. Bloom (1990), James (1990), and Diessel (2004) found that the first connective to emerge was *and*; and later, other connectives such as *because*, *but*, and *if* to make up conjoined-clause constructions.

In the beginning most of Ray's sentences were simple. However, he also produced multi-clause utterances that involved the connectives *and*, *but*, *because*, and *if*. Connective is used in two kinds of utterances: non-conjunction constructions (Diessel, 2004) like in *I go to beach, I swimming* and multi functions of *and*-clauses used in a variety of semantic relations (James, 1990; Diessel, 2004) as additive clause in *My toy is car and I love my toy* and as temporal clause in *I eat and my brother bought a 'crash gear'*. Connective *but* is used once like in *I very, very angry but I forget you*. Connective *because* is used to introduce an isolated utterance as a response to a causal *why*-question in *Why do you like the book? Ray: Because cool*, while connective *if* is used in adverbial clauses in *If I friend with Titan, I want to play ball*.

English children acquire connectives *when* and *before* later than other connectives *and*, *but*, and *because* (Diessel, 2004). Ray used connectives *when* in some sentences like in *It don't work when he don't make strategy*, connective *before* in *before I change my mind I throw you up the junk*. *Until* and *or* are two connectives produced later by children in Diessel's (2004) and Tomasello's (2003) studies. Ray produced these two connectives, *until* in *I train and train the baby Pokemon until become big* and *or*, in *Stay back or the lady will get hurt*.

In Diessel's (2004) and Tomasello's (2003) studies, it was found that the connectives *because* and *so* appeared at the same time in English children's speech. In contrast, the emergence of the connective *so* was much later than *because* in Ray's speech. For example, *I should bring helmet, so I can't die*. Other connectives produced are *then* to signal temporal clauses in *We run, then we got back there*, *whether* in *I don't care whether is hot*, *wherever* in *I see wherever he come*, and *as* in *Do as I say*.

The uses of connectives to connect two clauses related semantically and pragmatically have developed in Ray's speech at the end of the study. Speakers do not always use connectives to link two clauses to make the communication natural and effective. In some contexts, Ray omitted the connectives, and this is done appropriately. He omitted connectives *but* in *This is my best toys. I want to get more, because* in *You can't get in my room. I want to play band,* and *so* in *I'm getting hiccough. I'll get some water.* The last connective produced in Ray's speech is *or else* used as a warning or a threat like in *Nara, get down my dollies, or else!* All in all, within 18 months Ray produced 17 connectives to form conjoined clauses, and this has proved that his development of English is tremendous.

CONCLUSIONS

Ray's development of English complex sentences is significant since within 18 months he could produce various sentence constructions (infinitival and sentential and also conjoined clauses) accordingly. The findings of the study have proven that the acquisition of his English is similar if not the same as that of English children. Ray is a native Indonesian who learns English in a foreign setting, yet the process of English development follows the same path as that of English children. This is because there are liable universal principles apparently underlying this condition: innate capacity in a child's brain to learn any language in his environment, a child's prime time in learning language, sufficient exposure to and opportunities to the use language; and this is apparently applicable to the learning of language.

REFERENCES

- Bialystok, E. (1997). Effects of bilingualism and biliteracy on children's emerging concepts of print. *Development Psychology*, 33, 429-440.
- Bialystok, E., & Hakuta, K. (1994). *In other words*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bloom, P. (1990). Syntactic distinctions in child Language. *Journal of Child Language*, 17, 343-355.
- Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Brown, R., & Fraser. (1963). The acquisition of syntax. In C. N. Cofer and B. Musgrave (eds.), *Verbal behavior and learning: Problems and process*, (pp. 28-73). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Chomsky, C. (1969). *The acquisition of syntax in children from 5 to 10*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1999). On nature, use, and acquisition of language. In W. C. Ritchie and T. K. Bathia (eds.), *Handbook of child language acquisition*. New York:

- Academic Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic structures*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Dardjowidjojo, S. (2000). Psikolinguistik: Pengantar pemahaman bahasa manusia [Psycholinguistics: Introduction to understanding the language of human being]. Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Finegan, E., & Bresnier, N. (1989). *Language: Its structure and use*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
- Foley, J., & Thompson, L. (2003). *Language learning: A lifelong process*. London: Arnold.
- Guasti, M. T. (2002). *Language acquisition: The growth of grammar*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Hakuta, K. (2001). A critical period for second language acquisition. In D.B. Bailey, J. T. Bruer, F. J. Symons & J.W. Lichtman (eds.), *Critical thinking about critical period*, (pp. 93-205). Baltimore: Paul Books.
- Hakuta, K. (1976). A case study of a Japanese child learning English as a second language. *Language Learning*, 26(2), 321-351.
- Hakuta, K. (1974). Prefabricated patterns and the emergence of structure in second language acquisition. *Language Learning*, 24(2), 287-297.
- Hoff, E. (2001). *Language development*. Belmont: Thompson Learning, Inc.
- James, S. L. (1990). *Normal language acquisition*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Johnson, J., & Newport, E. (1991). Critical period effects on universal properties of language: The status of subadjacency in the acquisition of a second Language. *Cognition*, 39(3). 215-258.
- Lenneberg, E. H. (1967). *Biological foundation of language*. New York: John Wiley & Son.
- Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (1993). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Lightfoot, D. (1999). *The development of language: Acquisition, change, and evolution*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Lindfors, J. W. (1980). *Children's language and learning*. Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Littlewood, W. T. (1984). *Foreign and second language learning: Language acquisition research and its implications for the classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Long, M. (1990). Maturation constraints on language development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 12(3), 251-285.
- McLaughlin, B. (1984). *Second language acquisition in childhood*. Hillsdale, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Menyuk, P. (1988). *Language development: Knowledge and use*. Boston: Scott, Foresman and Company.
- Mitchell, R., & Myles, F. (1988). *Second language learning theories*. New York:

- Oxford University Press Inc.
- Moon, J. (2000). *Children learning English*. Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- O'Grady, W. (2005). *How children learn language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Grady, W. (1997). *Syntactic development*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Pinker, S. (1994). *The language instinct*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Slobin, D. I. (1970). Universal of grammatical development in children. In G.B. Flores D'Arcais & W.J.M. Levelt (eds.). *Advances in Psycholinguistics* (pp. 174-186). Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing.
- Tomasello, M. (2003). *Constructing a language: A usage-based theory of language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Whan-Cho, S., & O'Grady, W. (1997). Language acquisition: The emergence of grammar. In W. O'Grady, M. Dobrovolsky & F. Katamba (eds.), *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction* (pp. 464-499). London: Addison Longman Limited.
- Wiradji, S. M. (2006, January 26). School with international orientation mushrooming. *The Jakarta Post*, p. 16.
- Wortham, S. C. (1994). *Early children curriculum: Development bases for learning and teaching*. New York: Macmillan College Publishing Company.

