SOME REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE LEARNING MATTERS

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Abstrak

Bahasa merupakan sesuatu yang sangat penting bagi kehidupan manusia, termasuk Bahasa Inggris. Jika bahasa pertama dipelajari sejak kanak-kanak dan didapat langsung dari kedua orangtuanya secara alamiah, berbeda dengan Bahasa Inggris. Bahasa Inggris dikenalkan saat mereka belajar di sekolah. Perbedaan yang sangat umum ditemukan adalah permasalahan tata bahasa. Dalam tulisan ini, penulis menyampaikan hal-hal yang berhubungan dengan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di Indonesia secara menyeluruh. Diantaranya adalah mengenai bahasa, tata bahasa, bahasa baku, pengajaran tata bahasa, dan yang terakhir adalah pragmatis dalam konteks pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di Indonesia. Semuanya dianalisa dan disertai dengan refleksi berdasarkan pengalaman empiris penulis yang merupakan praktisi dalam pengajaran bahasa Inggris.

Key words: pembelajaran bahasa

INTRODUCTION

When someone asks us about what language is, perhaps each person will have a different answer to it. Formerly, I saw language as only a means of communication. How people try to get some information ~~others~~ and conversely, how others try to give information to us. That is language. People use language in their daily life and it is right that the position of language is at the center of human life (Cook, 1996), because people cannot live without language. This view is really a simple definition of language. I believe that L1 (first language) learning is different from the L2 (second language) learning. In the L1 learning, people have learned the language since they were children. In this case, the most important thing is how they convey meaning. Children learn language from their parents naturally. We speak our first language comfortably. We do not need to think about grammar or structures because we have learned it subconsciously. It seems that we do not spend a lot of energy to communicate in the L1.

On the other hand, in L2 learning or foreign language learning it is completely different, especially, for adult learners. Children can immerse themselves in the second

language when they are put in the target language environment. In Indonesia, it is rare to find people who speak English fluently. One of the reasons for this is the perception that English is a very difficult language. We only know, when we learn English, that we have to know the structures or patterns of sentences. So structure is very important. However, in reality, we can never use structures learned in school without knowing about their functional use. Even when we meet a native speaker we feel anxious greeting them. From this evidence, I assume that learning English does not only mean knowing the structures, but also understanding the linguistics, which are phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, and contexts, in which the language is used. In this respect, I do not intend to reject Finegan (1997) and Fromkin's (1999) idea that language is a rule-governed system.

As noted above, we cannot see the language simply from how sentences are formed. Language is a very broad world. Not just the structures, but deeper understanding of the language. To know a language, firstly, means to know how human beings produce speech sounds from their speech organs. Different language has different sound systems. For example, in English, some words ended by 'k' letter always sound /k/ 'voiced' as in 'kick', 'cook', so when a native speaker learns Indonesian, it is difficult for her/him to pronounce /k/ 'voiceless' at the end of words such as: 'tidak' or 'gemuk'. From the example, therefore, knowing the sound system of a language will show the way to the correct pronunciation.

Secondly, knowing a language also comprises how to relate sounds and meaning (concept). When we heard the word 'chair', our mind will directly think of certain object, which is used to sit and made of wood, metal, or plastic. This knowledge of words and concepts are also used by the deaf people in using the signs, gestures or body language to convey meaning.

As well, knowing a language involves how to combine words into phrases and phrases into sentences. The capability of people to 188 and and create new sentences is unlimited. By reading, people can write and talk many things about human life with their own creativity of words. Finally, to know a language people have to know how to use the sentences in appropriate situations and contexts. This is the ability to utilise the language in different situations, to different interlocutors and for different purposes.

Those aspects of language above lead to a discrepancy between what people know about language (linguistic competence) and how people can use the language in real life situation (linguistic performance). Linguistic competence is the knowledge of sound system, words, word formation, sentences and meaning, while linguistic competence is how people

perform the language based on the context and situation. Both competences support each other, so in mastering a language we cannot leave out one of them.

In addition, I agree also with what Finegan (1997) has proposed. To know a language, people need to consider three sides of language: *expression*, this is about words, phrases and sentences produced, *content,* about the meaning of expression and *context* or the social situation, where the expression is spoken. Therefore, when we know a language we should know the grammar, which are the expression and the meaning, and the context, so that we understand language and its functions.

As language teachers, the responsibility we have is that we have to take into account the role of the language 'rules'. Since language is a rule-governed system, a sentence basically consists of words or phrases, which are highly patterned. If we misarrange a sentence, this will lead to misinterpretation and confusion. However, in reality it is difficult to control the rules because language is changing constantly, developing and becoming more flexible.

From the description above it is obvious that learning a language is not just learning its grammar, but how people understand the meaning based on the context. As language grammar change slowly, today people begin to start a sentence with 'and' and 'but' or using a preposition at the end of a sentence. Indeed, these are acceptable since the most important thing is to understand the message given.

Furthermore, God creates human beings with brains to think and to create something new with our cognitive potentials. So, people are creative to construct sentences, expressions, jargons, slangs, etc. As long as the expressions are understandable, some people will accept them. I believe that language rules play an important role in communication. Without grammar communication does not occur. However, language teachers should consider the best ways to teach language rules linguistically and contextually so that learners can use the language naturally. It is important too, to clarify to students, that in real life language is more complex than they have learned. Language is dynamic and sometimes unpredictable, so they have to be aware of that.

METHODOLOGY

What is grammar?

Grammar sounds very familiar to Indonesian English classrooms because whenever and wherever students study English, they will learn grammar. Not only students but also

some English teachers assume that the meaning of grammar refers to the structures or patterns of sentences. Some students may feel that grammar is easy, but most of them find difficulty in studying it. Grammar still becomes the focus of English language teaching in Indonesia, although the 1994 curriculum has emphasized students' learning written and spoken language. Even in the university 'structure' becomes one of the required subjects.

Also in the national final exam, this demands the students' language knowledge in doing the test, which is always a 'gruelling computer-scorable standardized multiple-choice examination' (Brown's term). So, if we talk about grammar students directly think about tenses. However, grammar is much more than just tenses. It involves morphology, phonology, semantics, syntax and lexicon (Fromkin, 1999). Actually I am still anxious if grammar only includes the five major aspects above. I consider that discourse and pragmatics should be included since they are important too, in learning English. Those aspects of grammar look at the sound system, the meaning system, the word formation rules, the sentence formation rules, how sentences are used in conversation and how contexts influence meaning. All of these are very important in learning a language.

Then, some linguists divide the grammar in the terms of 'descriptive', 'prescriptive' and teaching grammar. Beforehand, those terms of the division are actually unfamiliar for me. In fact, 'descriptive' grammar is only the model of the speakers' grammar, while 'prescriptive' grammar prescribes the 'rules' of language we should use. Teaching grammar is the grammar we use to teach English at school, including teaching the rules explicitly. I think all of them belong to the traditional grammar, especially both 'prescriptive' and teaching grammar, because they do not reflect the actual language spoken by language users of that language. If we relate it to the second language learning, 'prescriptive' grammar is hardly applied in reality because people speak a language cannot follow the other people dictation. This is to say, 'prescriptive' grammarians cannot force people to speak in monotonous rules as language is changing steadily.

However, it is sometimes inevitable for language teachers to teach grammar or explain the rules of language explicitly in the classroom. In this case, teachers should use communicative approaches and provide natural situations and contexts so that the grammar they are learning brings about meaningful language use. That is why, studying discourse and pragmatics is important because when students go outside the classroom, they will face a very different world of English. Although they do not have the opportunity to live in an English speaking country, at least, they know the functions of language.

Finally, in teaching grammar, taking the students' errors into account is best considered. We should be careful in judging students' sentences as grammatically right or wrong. For example, in sentence '*John uses to get up early*' (McKnight, 1998), is grammatically correct, but this provides at least three interpretation. This can be meant 'John usually get up early', 'John used to get up early' or 'John uses the alarm clock to get up early'. From this evidence it is clear enough that the teacher should know what is the intended meaning a student wants to refer to, and also understand the context of the student's sentences. If we know the context, then, we can correct them.

What is standard language?

Talking about 'standard' language, my first impression is a language, which is used in formal situations, such as in a meeting, court, education, government and media. There must be certain rules of language so that it can be accepted as 'standard' language. In Indonesia, there is Standard Indonesian, which people have to speak. Different countries have their own standard languages. In studying English most students do not realise and know that they study and speak Standard English since they learn English as what their teacher has taught to them. From set readings I begin to understand that standard language is when a language is acknowledged and accepted by a certain community, which uses the language (Fromkin, 1999). So, whatever the language if it is used widely and accepted this becomes the 'standard' language.

Then, the appearance of idiolects, dialects, pidgin and creoles is an obvious proof that actually there is no special 'standard' language. By using their idiolects, people speak to others in different styles of speaking. We can say that idiolect is a specific, individual characteristics of speaking influenced by age, sex, personality, etc. But in conversation both speakers still understand each other. Australians, for instance, speak different English idiolects, which sometimes seems to be difficult and confusing to understand for non-native speakers.

As well, dialect, which is used by certain group of people, is an example of language variety and mutually intelligible. To illustrate this, as English has become an international language and is the second most widely used language after Chinese, English has different dialects, such as Australian English, British English and American English. Other non-English speaking countries, which use English as the second or foreign language, tend to follow one of those English dialects. For example, most schools in Indonesia are likely to

adopt the Standard British English. However, in my opinion, sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a sentence is 'standard' or not. In a sentence '*I didn't say nothing*' (McKnight, 1998) is grammatically incorrect since there are two negators. However, it can be 'standard' because the speaker and the addressee accept and understand it, though Fromkin, et.al. may classify this sentence as non 'standard' one. In fact, this sentence is very common in English.

Subsequently, as English has been widespread to other non speaking countries by traders, refugees or missionaries, sometimes it became mixed with the other language, which is called 'pidgin'. For example, the old pidgin English in Australia, by the Aborigines and the whites was called 'barbarous mixture' (Baker, 1981). Pidgin usually has more simple sentences, less prepositions and fewer words. The main purpose of both parties is to convey the meaning. This leads to the creation of a new language. When this new language is spoken natively by children, this is called 'creoles'. Examining from Fromkin, et.al., Baker (1981) and Holm (1988) it seems that wherever people are, they need language to communicate, even it is a simple language such as pidgin and creoles. These emerge because of people's needs to create them and they become 'standard' languages if people speak, accept and understand the language. Thus, again it can be inferred that 'standard' language varies in different places in the world or there is no 'standard' language.

Historically, language is changing according to the passing of time as the knowledge is developing too. Language is changing because the community is also changing. In line with the increasing needs of people to communicate and to express different purposes, then, it is impossible to hinder the language change. This happens in most languages in the world. Noting Fromkin and Finegan's description I think people sometimes do not realize the language transformation from generation to generation. When we read a book from ancient time in our native language, we may feel funny about the spelling or the structures of sentences, since we do not use it anymore. Language changes can be investigated from newspapers, magazines, books, TV, radios, movies, etc. and those vary from phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax and lexical changes. Some creative people generate new terms or formulated expressions, which were never used beforehand. Some words may be taboo at some time and now not anymore, or even some words disappear now.

At last, relating to the above description, it seems that there is a conflict between the modern views and the 'prescriptive' grammarians. In one hand, the modern views see the language change as a development and this is natural. On the other hand, the 'prescriptive'

grammarians try to defend certain 'rules' of language from changing either in phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics since language change is considered as corruption. I think people cannot rely on the prescriptive grammar, which gives certain regulations in using language. I agree with what Cook (1996) has said that grammarians only teach people the language, not dictate what to say. In short, it would be safe for us to speak language in acceptable and understandable ways.

ANALYSIS
The teaching of Grammar

Perhaps, most English teachers have similar experiences in teaching grammar. Basically, the 1994 English curriculum in Indonesia has tended to adopt the communicative approach. However, this curriculum only gives teachers a set of topics and goals and does not provide the strategies in teaching grammar to achieve the goals of being able to communicate in both written and spoken English. That is why, teachers tend to teach grammar traditionally by giving students small parts of language. This is called 'traditional grammar' (Cook, 1996).

However, it might be true that traditional grammar is one of a number of approaches available to Indonesian teachers, so they use it (Bernard, 1993). In this way, the teacher gives explanation first about the patterns of sentences based on parts of speech, then examples are followed by some exercises. Also the teacher teaches verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. discretely. This kind of method seems not to work. Students are not able to use English as communication since language is taught separately, not in context. When the teacher explains the grammar, students seem to understand, but after that they forget it.

From the readings, I am beginning to understand that teaching grammar deductively instead of inductively, by giving students the rules first is giving them too much in a hurry for students to learn. Students are forced to follow the rules in making sentences, which are abstract. How can they apply the rules in reality if they only have the experience in cultivating the sentences based on the rules? Actually I do not mean to blame people who agree that language teachers might be the worst people to teach language as Lewis (1986) said. Perhaps the way the teacher used in the class is not interesting and challenging so that learning process has not been successful. What the teacher has taught seems to be useless when they face the outside world of English. Some students may feel satisfied with the teacher's explanation, but most of them fail even on the exam. It is difficult to judge whose fault this is, may be the teacher, who cannot teach well or the students who do not study well.

Relating to teaching grammar, since learning language is a process, the teacher should not hope that students will be able to master English quickly. Teaching grammar can be through integrating all macro skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. The teacher should give exposure to English. Certainly, the teacher should be creative and adaptable in designing students' tasks in such a way 193 ne materials and tasks can be interesting and attract students' attention. I agree with Harmer's suggestion to use the real objects, tape recorders, newspapers, and brochures to teach grammar since the grammar is used in context. This is what Kettle (1990) refers to as 'from text to grammar'.

As noted above, teaching grammar needs teacher's creativity to use interesting approaches. However, I still feel apprehensive about what Lewis has suggested 'stop explaining, start exploring'. In Indonesia, the term 'exploring' is considered as new and this will be hard to start, as students are used to being spoonfed by the teacher. As a compromise, I agree with Garner and Harmer's (1991) idea, it would be better if the teacher remains introducing how to explore and discover the grammar to students, but, if necessary, when students get into difficulties the teacher should explain it. Exploring should be familiarized gradually because it is being implemented in a setting, where English is not used outside the class. Misunderstandings of teacher's instruction may happen, so explaining is unavoidable.

From McKnight's (2000) class activity, I would like to take an example of students' exploring the grammar, that is 'decompression' activity, which is done in pairs. Basically, this is a dictation activity, but the text is arranged in such a way, without small letters, punctuations and spaces. So, when one student dictates to the other, he/she has to contemplate not only the linguistic components of grammar, but also the discourse and the pragmatics. From the linguistic value students can learn the phonology (pronunciation), morphology (word formation), syntax (sentence formation), semantics (word and sentence meanings), discourse and pragmatics in which students concieve the context of the discourse occurs. Besides, the communicative interaction between student and student also can be enhanced.

From the example above, it is apparent that most of the activity is done by students. During the activity students are exploring the grammar by themselves. They also employ their functional language to make agreement, negotiate the meaning and finally construct their sentences. This activity is really a challenging one for students to do better than the others. It is also interesting and enjoyable so that students can engage in the materials and analyse the grammar.

Finally, to make students are able to use the target language formal knowledge of grammar is not always helpful. It seems to be less useful for the teacher to teach grammar explicitly since students would only know the language knowledge, but they do not know how to perform the language. Thus, exploring grammar while students involve in the class activity and experience the communication is more valuable than explicit grammatical explanation.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of how people interpret the meaning of utterances based on the situation and context (Fromkin, 1999; Finegan, 1997). Yule (1998) gives a more specific term that pragmatics is the study of 'invisible meaning'. It means the way people try to guess the underlying meaning behind the utterances spoken or written, including assumptions, aims, types of actions, context and interpretations. Personally, the study of pragmatics is relatively new for me because in the last five years pragmatics has not been studied in the university. Perhaps only a few people study pragmatics in Indonesia. Today pragmatics has been more popular in campuses, but still has made little impression in language teaching and learning. I think, then, when we study pragmatics in the first language it is easier than the second language. The reason is we have been familiar with the language, the context and the terms, but this is not necessarily true. In fact, studying pragmatics is very challenging.

Pragmatics is important for language teaching and learning for some reasons. Firstly, this is to give the idea to students that language is not just in the classroom. Students will face a lot of different utterances, discourses and conversations, which they have to interpret. We can find many different expressions either written or spoken in any public places. In interpreting the intended meaning of an utterance, we should take into account both the linguistic and situational context (Fromkin, 1999). For example, when we see a sign '*Thank you for not smoking*' in a hospital. Literally, this is the expression of thanking to smokers who do not smoke. But when we think deeply about the situational context of this speech act, this is a kind of request, which should be done.

Secondly, pragmatics is important to avoid misinterpretations. A locution sometimes serves more than one meaning, the literal and connotation meaning. So we have to know the exact meanings of a discourse because in pragmatics language is used in context, not abstract. Finally, pragmatics can be used to deliver requests, opinions, etc. in appropriate ways,

hopefully the listeners will also give responses, answers, suggestions appropriately as we wish.

Subsequently, to understand the nature of language we should understand the pragmatics (Leech, 1983). Pragmatics involves the study of presuppositions and speech acts. Presupposition is used to apply the utterances in appropriate ways. In the sentence *'Have some more tea?'*, presupposes the listener has had some tea beforehand. Presupposition also can be used to get information indirectly (Yule, 1998). For instance, in sentence *'My son is very clever'*. The listener will know that the speaker has a son.

Then, speech acts can be used to express different categories of conversation, such as: *representatives, commisives, directives, declarations, expressives and verdictives* (Finegan, 1997). In *'commisive'* speech acts, people can practise them to *bet, promise, warn, command, etc*. Fromkin, et.al call the verbs used in 'commisive' speech acts as *'performative verbs'* and the context, which underlie the purposes of a promise, a threat, a warning, etc. are called *'illocutionary force'* of speech acts.

Indeed, to interpret the underlying meaning, people need to know not only the background knowledge of the context, but also the linguistic knowledge of the discourse. However, one thing, which seems to be 'powerful' is the *'cultural'* knowledge. When we are wrong to say or ask something to someone, who has different culture with us, it will cause a serious offence. For instance, in Indonesia asking about the age or marital status is considered as 'common', but in Australia it can be considered as interfering other people's privacy, so it should be avoided.

Then, the use of authentic data in studying pragmatics is very beneficial. As authentic data is taken from outside the classroom, this provides original communication of native speakers. As a result, these materials are more challenging, but interesting so that students are stimulated to guess the messages or meanings of the authentic extracts. Also authentic materials will give chance for the teacher to select the materials based on the students' needs and interests. Conversely, the students will feel more motivated in learning the language and they will get more knowledge about the culture of different countries.

In relation to the use of authentic language data, finally, it will be empowering both teachers and students. For students, the authentic language data will provide them valuable input because the original materials are certainly spoken by native speakers. Students would feel independent and doubtless in speaking English since they are sure that native speakers also use the utterances or expressions they learned in the real life. On the other hand, for

teachers, who are the native speakers, giving students the authentic language data will make them confident. The language data exposed was taken from the real life conversation. It seems that the teacher gives students a 'power' to be ready to encounter the English environment in different situations and contexts.

CONCLUSION

As a teacher of English as a foreign language in Indonesia, we should not only know the methodology but also the terms used in the language. Initially, the English teachers should understand the specific features of how to learn the L1 and L2 so that they could create some particular ways to teach English for their learners. Then, grammar knowledge is also very important as long as the grammar teaching is in accordance with the use of the language in the learners daily life. The grammar teaching should also be taught in communicative ways to avoid students' boredom and to maximize the usage of the language meaningfully. Next, the standard language knowledge is useful f   learners to communicate in standardized language use in certain countries. Finally, u   ding the pragmatics of certain expressions in English is also crucial as this insight can be beneficial to learn the different cultures between the L1 and L2.

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