

## STUDYING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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### ABSTRACT

In line with the advancement of science and technology, the importance of English, which is now the most widely used medium of communication all over the world, is getting bigger from time to time. Every individual who wants to pursue success in his or her career needs to study the language. Students, job seekers, and even those who have been working make efforts to study the language. This article offers some ideas of how English as a foreign language should be studied by Indonesian learners. The sharing of ideas is based on the writer's experience in learning and teaching the language. To him, as long as English proficiency is the aim of studying it, the language skills should be presented integratively. At least until Intermediate level, it is not the extensiveness of the language coverage or range of topic areas to prioritize, but the intensiveness or the depth of the related language items for the learners to practise using. The study of words in view of pronunciation, spelling, meaning or concept, and use should be intensively performed so as to build fluency and accuracy. The grammar should be taught during the study of how to use the words being learned in context all of which will sooner or later lead to appropriacy.

**Key words:** integrated skills, pronunciation, spelling, concept, use

## INTRODUCTION

To be able to speak and write in English has become such an important thing to everyone in the world, including Indonesians. No matter what major or specialization one is doing, he or she needs to have the ability to communicate well in the most widely used language. In line with the fast development of science and technology, the role of English in everyone's career is more vividly felt. This international lingua franca is believed to benefit everyone in paving his or her way to a good job regardless of its type and level of position. With good English language skills in addition to his or her specialization, his or her chance to compete becomes greater compared to those who are not able to communicate in the language. This seems to have been more and more greatly realized by Indonesian people – not only by the students but also the parents, especially those living in the cities.

One obvious indication of the growing awareness of the importance of English as a key to a better career is that it is not only secondary school students and university students who take non-formal English courses but also primary school students and even younger children. For the last two groups of children mentioned, surely, it is the parents who push and send them to study at these English Courses or private courses. This reality depicts that the parents are adequately aware that learning to master English as a foreign language takes a long time. This is a fact. As some research findings have uncovered that most Indonesian university graduates do not have good proficiency in English that is after studying the language for at least 10 years (Sadtono, 1988).

That both parents and the children are aware of the importance of having good English skills and the length of time needed to study the language is truly good news for the world of English language learning and teaching in Indonesia. Parents' awareness about this, consequently, will involve them in pushing their children to study the language which is very positive for the progress of acquiring the English language. Good cooperation between parents and the children is absolutely needed in this case in order to build learning continuity. The children will be more motivated to learn and as a result, not only will they study at school but also at home. Moreover, when this happens, their exposure to the language will be greater which will then lead to acquiring the language faster. The more they are exposed to the language, the more they will love it. When they really have loved it, they will use it. When they use it often, they will be in the habit of using it just like the way they communicate in Indonesian. Ideally, it is this kind of situation that is worth creating so as to achieve the goal of the study. However, to create such situations is definitely not as easy as to say it due to the existing barriers, for example, the limited time, space and atmosphere for the learners to practise producing and receiving information in the language.

In this article I would like to offer some ideas concerning the issue based on my experience in learning and teaching English as a foreign language which I hope to be of some benefit to those who want to succeed in learning the language. When someone can be said to be a good user of English, how those language skills should be approached, and what needs knowing when learning an English word, will be discussed in this article.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. When someone can be said to be a good user of English

In social interactions, it is common to hear questions such as "Do you speak English?" How well do you speak English?" or read sentences in job advertisements such as "The applicants should have a good command of English or proficient in both spoken and written English." Such expressions bring about other questions like "When do we actually say that someone has good English?" The answer to this question is made available below.

Someone can be said to have a good command of a language, including English, when he or she can understand people speaking in the language, particularly its native speakers and can be understood by those people - both in spoken and written language. Also, he or she should be able to express himself or herself intelligibly and be able to understand what other people, particularly the native speakers of the language, say or write. In other words, the abilities to speak and to write, which are called *productive skills* and the abilities to listen and to read, called *receptive skills*, in the language are four skills that must be mastered by every learner of the language. When he or she has possessed such skills he or she can be said to have got the quality of being a good language user: To understand and to be understood.

Now, let's talk further about the four language skills. The productive language skills: Writing and Speaking, basically have the same purpose, namely to produce information. Halliday (1985) stated: "Talking and writing are different ways of saying. They are different modes for expressing linguistic meanings. So, the two ways are the realizations of meaning, in the sense that anything that can be said in writing can also be said in speaking, and vice versa." However, he added that when looked into details, there is actually a difference; just like a language of a community may not be able to say everything about the culture of another community. I agree with Halliday about this. Let's take English and Indonesian as an example to show that. For instance, "masuk angin" in sentence "Kuenya sudah masuk angin, jangan makan lagi." cannot be equivalently said in English. This is due to the absence of that aspect of culture from the culture of English people. Lim, K.B. (1975) said that *meanings are closely related with culture, and objects, ideas or institutions present in one culture may be absent from or exist in a different form in another culture*. This could be the reason why certain expressions in one language are either absent in another language or have a different meaning like the one mentioned in Indonesian and English above.

In accordance with the function of language, which is a tool for communication, the purpose of the receptive language skills is to enable the communication participants to receive information produced through the productive skills. This is the fundamental relation between both the productive skills and the receptive skills: Speaking to Listening and Writing to Reading. In speaking as a productive skill, for instance, he or she should be able to pronounce the words correctly, following the International Phonetic Association (IPA) model, which was used by Jones, D and has been revised by Gimson, A.C. (1977). This study of pronunciation includes the part of the word or syllable to be stressed, the ending and the beginning sounds of two different words that can be connected (connected speech). English is a language in which one distinguishes stressed and unstressed syllables (Wells, J.C and Colson Greta, 1971). Accent, however, is excluded from the topic as every nation has its own accent. As said by Brown, P. and

existing old information stored in the mental home – or space in the brain. It is the active brain that enables the reader to comprehend the text fully. Another advantage is that the reader will even be empowered to sort out the existing information so as to whether accept or reject the information. This will result in the reader's critical reading ability which is important to have in reading activities.

Based on the above elaboration, therefore, it is realistic to say that Writing and Speaking as two productive language skills are also closely related to the receptive skills: Listening and Reading. The relationship between the two kinds of language skills should be greatly felt when going further to the fundamental of studying a language which says that "Using is learning", and "Not using is losing". What is used certainly is what is known. We get knowledge from reading and listening which is then shared with others by speaking or writing to them. When we often talk or write about a certain piece of information or something that we just get informed, we will not lose it. So, it can be firmly stated that the integration of both the receptive skills and the productive skills should be made to the maximum so as to acquire a fruitful and immediate outcome. The old saying "Practice makes perfect" seems to be applicable here. In order to do so, the words contained in a topic of teaching or learning, should be made known to the students. It is here that their mastery of words is so highly demanded. Then, they are asked to perform communication acts in the four language skills. The teacher can start with Reading that is reading a text on a certain topic, then move on to Speaking based on the information obtained from the reading activity, then get one student to retell the story and the other students listen, and finally assign them to write the idea in their own way. They should benefit fluency and accuracy from these kinds of activities. Above all, the teacher should watch and note down any language skills that need additional explanation for improvement both in oral and written language skills.

### **3. What needs knowing when learning an English word**

In my opinion, what teachers need to do in teaching or students in studying the language after realizing well about what has been explained above is that the words and the grammar of the language should be accurately learned or made familiar to the learners. At the microl level of language study the two aspects are fundamental. Wilkins, D (1976) stated that without grammar very little can be said; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. A statement which affirms this opinion is given by Gleason and Ratner. According to them words are considered as the building blocks of language; words and combination of words allow us to symbolize objects and events in the world around us. With regards to this affirmation, an important question to ask further is that "What aspects do we need to know in studying a word or when do we say that we have mastered a word?"

There are at least four aspects to know about a word. Firstly, we must know how to say the word – known as pronunciation. In studying the pronunciation of a word, the stress, especially the primary stress, should be made clear. In order to do so, however, how a word is syllabified should also be clarified so that the learner knows on which syllable to stress. In English, the accuracy of stress is of great importance as it can change meaning. At least, a wrongly stressed word may confuse or obscure the meaning of the word itself or it sounds awkward to the listener of it, or its native speakers. For example,

the word "idea", which is often wrongly pronounced according to my observation, has two syllables: /ai/ and /di/. The syllable to be stressed is the second. Evidently, the stress is still put on the first syllable by many Indonesian people.

Secondly, the learner must be sure of how to write every word, called *spelling*, he or she is studying. Spelling of English words is so different from that of Indonesian. The spelling of Indonesian words, generally, is corresponding to their pronunciation, but not the spelling of English words. Concerning this matter, let me quote Brinton's comment. He said, "That writing is often an imperfect means of representing speech is perhaps most obvious in the well-known inadequacies of English spelling." (Brinton, Laurel J., 2000) He specified that if the actual sounds of English are compared with the orthography, the graphic symbols or letters used in writing, some discrepancies will be found, namely:

- a. one sound can be represented by a variety of letters, as with the vowel sound in *meet, meat, city, key, ceiling, people, niece, evil, and quay*;
- b. one letter can represent a variety of sounds as with *d* in *damage, educate, picked*;
- c. a letter or letters may represent no sound at all, as in *knee, gnat, lamb, receipt, right, honor, rhyme, psalm, and salmon*;
- d. two or more letters may represent a single sound, as in *throne, chain, edge, shore, nation, itch, inn, school, eat, friend, too, leopard, cause, blood, or lieutenant*;
- e. a letter may simply indicate the quality of a neighbouring sound as in *dinner vs diner* (where a double or single *n* indicates the quality of the preceding vowel); or *dine vs din* (where the presence or absence of final *e* indicates the quality of the preceding vowel);
- f. a single letter may represent two or more sounds as in *box (x=ks)*; and
- g. some sounds have no graphic representation, as with the initial sounds in *universe* and *one*.

Due to the complexity of the spelling, as I have noticed, even native speakers of English may also make spelling mistakes in their writings. I have found the word "pronunciation" wrongly written twice by an English native speaker who was an English teacher. Instead, it was "pronounciation" that was written.

Another important thing to consider about word pronunciation is that a word, sometimes, is differently stressed and pronounced according to the word class or/and the meaning of it. A word which is only differently stressed for example is "import", /ImporT/ when used as a Noun, and imPort when used as a Verb. A word which is both differently stressed and pronounced is "minute", which is stressed on the first syllable (/mInIt/) when it is a Noun or a Verb, but /maInju:t/ when it is an Adjective, also the syllable /mi.../ becomes /ma.../. (Coubuild Dictionary).

What does this mean to us as foreigners who want to master English? When an English teacher who is an English native speaker could make such a spelling mistake, how then about English native speakers who are not English teachers and do not deal much with writing in the language and foreigners like Indonesians? Undoubtedly, the possibility of making spelling mistakes must be greater. Thus, to minimize the occurrences of such mistakes, extra practice is greatly needed.

Thirdly, the learner must know well about the concept of the word. What I mean by "concept" here is not merely the translation of the word itself in the learner's native language, but more than that. For instance, when learning the word 'bag', he or she should not only know the word in Indonesian, which is "tas", but it is important that he or she know what a bag is like. What a bag is usually made of, its size, that it has a strap, its function, etc. In this case, the teacher should try to introduce the attributes which cling to the presumably new word to the learners for the sake of clarification and practical exposure of the language to them. Also, that many words of the language have more than one meaning. In this respect, English is typical of all natural languages (Lyons, John, 1981). For example, what we have identified as "bank", has other meanings in addition to "financial institution", including "store, or storage place, such as "data bank", and "blood bank."

Fourthly, how the word is used must be made known to the learner. As mentioned earlier that using is learning. In order to enable the learner to use the word in communication, he or she should understand clearly about the rule of the language, the so called "grammar". In this case, particularly, is the class or part of speech of the word being learned. Does it belong to content or function word? When it is a content word, is it a Noun, Verb, Adjective, or Adverb? Having known this, the learner should study how each word class is used in a sentence since each of them has its own usage. In addition, when the word belongs to Function word, he or she should also realize that function word is needed to help him or her to build a larger unit of language for communication. The "article" and "preposition", for instance, have their own role in shaping words into meaningful language. The word "the" alone has no lexical meaning, but when not used appropriately, the sentence would not carry a correct meaning. The same with preposition "of", which does not have meaning by itself, but based on its function in the sentence. When it is not used properly, also the meaning would not be accurately conveyed.

Another positive effect of using the word to learn in a sentence or context is the sense of learning continuity. We should realize that normally, one does not communicate only with one word. One word can not fully convey his or her intention. Other words are needed so as to make the intention clear to the listener or the reader. The advantage is at least four fold here. Firstly, the new word the learner is learning will become more familiar to him or her and it even will be inherent in the mind, eventually. Secondly, the effort to use it will indirectly make him or her learn other words some of which he or she may be familiar or unfamiliar with. It is needless to say there is no harm of using known words. On the contrary, using known words should strengthen the learner's retention of the word(s) concerned. Thirdly, when it happens that there are new words among the words needed to convey the idea or intention, the learner will have to find the meaning of the word(s). So, continuity of learning or learning continuum does occur here. Fourthly, since meaning can only be made clear when the words used are properly arranged, the learner will have to learn how to arrange them syntactically or grammatically.

Meaning or concept is definitely not only needed at word level, but also at larger units of language such as phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and essays. That is why during the process of putting words together to make a sentence, an effort to ensure that the learners have understood the meaning or concept contained in the sentence being learned needs making. To do so, Concept Checking Questions (CCQ) should be carried out. The teacher should ask questions to check whether the idea of the communication is

fully conveyed. This thing is necessary for the ease and continuity of the communication or language use itself. The classical questions such as "Is it clear?, Do you understand?" do not seem to be effective for comprehension check. Too general. Specific questions should be asked instead. For example, to check whether the learner has already understood well the meaning or concept of sentence: "The cat has stolen the fish from the plate on the table.", a concept checking question such as "Is the fish still in the plate?" can apply. When the learner says, "Yes", it means she or he cannot catch the meaning of that sentence yet. If it is so, remedial teaching or further help needs giving.

#### CONCLUSION

The teaching English for the purpose of communication in Indonesia should be done integratively so as to intensify students' learning practice and use of the language. As a logical consequence of the language status in the country, which is just as a foreign language, not yet used for social intercourse within the country nor is it used as the medium of instruction but only taught as a subject in school, is that there is only limited time, opportunity, and space for Indonesian learners to have. This lack of chance should be anticipated and overcome by creating situations for them to keep interacting with one another. A continuity of learning and using the language should be established in order for the learners to get used to the language aspects being studied, not forgetting them soon after being exposed by the teacher. One way to be recommended for that purpose is by applying the idea of integrative teaching. This way of teaching allows students to use any new language or word taught repeatedly, both in spoken and written ways. All English language teachers in the country should realize and practise the principle of "It is not how much has been taught that is important, but how much the students have learned". To support or help make the principle come true students should be encouraged to practise producing and receiving an idea both in spoken and written English in various ways. With such good cooperation and participation of all sides, the teacher, the students and the parents, hopefully, a good learning outcome will be met.

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