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# CROSS-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN INDONESIA

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## **Abstract**

Teaching a language does not necessarily refer to the methods, but it is also important to put concern on the language itself. In fact, language teachers (or lecturers) mostly focus on 'how to teach' rather than 'what to teach'. It can be seen from the minimum number of linguistic subjects offered in an English education department. It is, nevertheless, important to bear in mind that by having comprehensive and holistic understanding on language ('what to teach'), teacher will be able to deliver not only list of rules or vocabulary, but also the insights behind the rules. Learners are not treated as machines, but as rationale automata. Linguistic theories therefore are important, let alone in the teaching of foreign language as English in Indonesia. This circumstance requires sufficient knowledge of cross-linguistic perspective of the language teacher (English and Indonesian) to accommodate the language teaching. Based on the explanation, thus this paper aims to describe the implementation and the benefits of linguistic typology—the subfield of linguistics dealing with cross-linguistic perspective—in English language teaching in Indonesia to re-emphasize the position of language teaching as one of the subfields of linguistics.

**Keywords:** *cross-linguistic perspective, linguistic typology, English language teaching, Indonesian*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Language teaching is of prominent topic recently due to the importance of language as a means of communication in this rapid growth of information era. The needs of supporting conducive and successful language teaching practices become the main discussion through the development of curriculum and the emergence of certain language policy. Many parties in language teaching, however, seem to forget the nature of language teaching as part of linguistics field. It is evident based on the limited linguistics subjects (including the small amount of credits) offered in English education department which result in the insufficient linguistic knowledge of language teacher.

Language teaching is—or was once—known as the subfield of applied linguistics (Alwasilah, 2011:127), apart from but related to theoretical linguistics. To redefine the position of language teaching within linguistics subfields, it is necessary to refer to the nature of theory and application. According to Halliday et al., the purpose of having theory is to use it (1966: 137). Hence, in applied

linguistics, linguistic theories are implemented to gain some benefits. Language teaching, for example, attempts to implement language acquisition and language learning theories conceptualized by linguists (especially psycholinguists). Nevertheless, the role of linguistics in language teaching is not only limited to the theories on acquisition but also to the description of a particular language. How will the teacher explain about the language if he does not really know the description of the language?

Another interesting point is the sociolinguistic background of a region where the language is being taught. In Indonesia, generally there are local language as the L1 and Indonesian as the L2 of the learners. English, the internationally recognized language, is taught as the third—if it is not foreign—language. Thus, teacher must not forget the interference(s) of the L1 and L2 to the learning process of English. It indeed does not only belong to language acquisition problem, but it is the problem of the understanding of the characteristics of the L1, L2 and English language either. Although the teacher is the native speaker of the L1, it does not necessarily mean he knows the characteristics or properties of the language.

Concerning the problem above, it is then intriguing and not exhausting to re-emphasize the importance of mastering linguistic theories, especially cross-linguistic perspective theories, on the teaching of language. Therefore this paper aims at describing the benefits of having good knowledge on linguistic typology in English language teaching in Indonesia. In other words, it is depicting 'what to teach' in language classroom.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **1. Theory of Language, Linguistic Description and Linguistic Typology**

As the scientific study of language, linguistics concerns on the description of all languages in the world; linguistics is dealing with all languages because linguistics is not about what language, but language itself (Verhaar, 2010). Thus, it is common to find linguists interested in all languages (Lyons, 1972:44).

Linguistics attempts to give comprehensive description of languages. Once the description obtained, linguistics moves to find out the underlying system of all languages: the common properties of languages. This is in line with Poedjosoedarmo who states that linguistics is about two things, namely *theory of language* and *linguistic description* (2001:23). To have the theory of language (the nature of language), linguists have to figure out the characteristics of languages (linguistic description).

Along with the task to describe languages, there is the concept of cross-linguistic perspectives in which it assumes that each language possesses its own characteristics. This is the approach of linguistic typology which classifies languages to some types based on some criteria (Comrie, 1981:30—31). It is therefore impossible to apply the same grammar in different language. For ages, however, the results of cross-linguistic perspective on language analyses remained the collection of data and typological analyses. Meanwhile, those results might be further used to gain some benefits of linguistic theories in real life through applied linguistics, especially language teaching which mostly occurs in cross-linguistic

context. It is obvious then language teaching needs the support of comprehensive understanding of linguistic typology.

## **2. Sociolinguistic Situation and English Language Teaching in Indonesia**

The first thing to consider when giving insights on cross-linguistic perspective in English language teaching in Indonesia is the sociolinguistic situation of the speech communities. In Indonesia, there are local language(s) as the L1, national language as the L2, and foreign language (English as the major one). As commonly found, L1 or the local language is the L variety, while the L2 is the H variety (Poedjosoedarmo, 2008). L1 is used along with the L2 and all of them are taught at school. Lately, however, Indonesian youth starts to avoid—or even being unfamiliar—with their local language and gain Indonesian as their L1. Javanese, for example, was once recognized as the L variety and Indonesian as H variety among Javanese people; today it is informal Indonesian as the L ('gaul' variety) and formal Indonesian as the H variety.

Since the immense contact between Indonesian and English, hitherto this paper will focus on cross-linguistic perspectives between these two languages in teaching of English in Indonesia. Regarding the nature of both languages, they are two different languages coming from two different language families: Austronesia and Indo-European.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Implementation of Linguistic Typology Knowledge in English Language Teaching in Indonesia**

Attempting to re-emphasize the prominence of linguistic typology in language teaching, this part is going to portray some implementations of language teaching in cross-linguistic perspective, focusing on the grammatical aspects. This section will provide some implementations of linguistic typology knowledge in the teaching of English in Indonesian context.

#### **The Teaching of Sentence Structure**

English is canonically an SVO language. Since inflection is no longer used in Present-day English, word order is the parameter of the grammatical relation of a sentence (Poedjosoedarmo, 2006) as in sentence (1).

(1) John broke the vase.

Alike with English, Indonesian is also a rigid word order language with SVO pattern (2).

(2) *Budi menanam padi.*

Both *John* and *Budi* serve as the subjects of sentence (1) and (2) respectively. Although in some extent in real communication the SVO word order might be modified depend on the syntactic choice of the speaker (Creswell, 2004:1) as it is seen in sentence (3) below.

(3) Steak, Ed grilled it.

This is different from Japanese, as an example, with SOV word order.

- (4) *Watashi wa shabu-shabu ga tabemasu.*  
I PART shabu-shabu PART eat  
'I eat shabu-shabu'

Japanese has case marker to indicate which one is the subject (*wa*) and which one is the object (*ga*) so it does not need to be fix in the word order.

Despite the similarities, English and Indonesian are still different languages so they have differences in some extent as in the following example.

- (5) It is raining.  
(6) *Sekarang hujan.*

Sentence (5) comprises subject *it* and predicate *is raining*. Sentence (6), conversely, only consists of predicate *hujan*, while *sekarang* is not the subject. It is basically the effect of English as non-pro-drop language of which it cannot drop the subject. In an eventive construction, English sentence needs syntactic subject, although it is semantically empty (Pavey, 2010). On the contrary, Indonesian does not need any syntactic subject if the construction semantically does not require it as in sentence (6). Indonesian has zero-valency predicate with argument preceding or following it (Wijana, 2010). Another alternative insight is proposed by Li and Thompson which state that English is a subject-prominent language, while Indonesian is a topic-prominent language (Li, 1976). It is understandable now why so many *it constructions* in English cannot be easily translated into Indonesia; this is due to the absence of equivalent *it construction* in Indonesian. It is also obvious now why English has 'I have stomachache', but Indonesian has '*Perut saya sakit*'. Language teacher with good linguistic knowledge is able to elaborate the 'reason' why these phenomena occur.

One more thing we should consider about the construction of English and Indonesian is the predicate as the central unit. English uniquely needs verb as its predicate filler (7,8). The predicate in Indonesian must be omitted in equative clauses as in (9) or it will be ungrammatical—and unacceptable either—as in (9a).

- (7) Mary loves her mather.  
(8) Mary is beautiful.  
(9) *Dina cantik.*  
(9a) \**Dina adalah cantik.*

### The Teaching of Sentence Element

Producing sentence in English must be restricted to the time information inflected in the verb or known as tense. Even though inflection is no longer used, but tense inflection is the exception. According to Poedjosoedarmo, tense inflection is still needed to differentiate between verb and other linguistic units such as noun, adjective, adverb, preposition, etc (2006). Unlike English, Indonesian is basically not an inflected language so the information of time is not inflected in the verb, but it is periphrastically stated in another constituent.

Besides tense, an English sentence must have a subject that is agreed with its verb and form subject-verb agreement. The realization of the agreement is

manifested in another verbal morphology as it is seen in the different morphological realization of the verbs in sentence (10) and (10a).

(10) He runs fast.

(10a) They run fast.

Although Indonesia typologically does not belong to inflectional language, the subject and verb in Indonesian sentence still agree with each other in different way of which it is semantic agreement manifested morphologically (Kaswanti Purwo in Kridalaksana and Moeliono, 1982; Oktavianti, 2013).

(11) Adik **membaca** komik.

(11a) Komik **dibaca** adik.

Sentence (11) is an active construction with *meN-* attached to the verb because the initial unit is the agent and the final unit is the patient. Otherwise, the passive form (11a) begins with the patient in initial position. Thus, affix *di-* is attached to the verb to indicate the passiveness. It is inevitably useful to understand this concept as a language teacher in order to be capable of giving the theoretical background of subject-verb agreement.

### The Teaching of Definiteness Concept

Each language has its own way to mark definiteness of the noun or noun phrase. Commonly found, English actively uses articles, namely *a/an/the* followed by the noun (Lyons, 2003) as in (12). Indonesia, unlike English, does not have article to indicate definiteness of the noun; there is *-nya* to mark the noun *mobil* (13) as a definite noun since it has previously been mentioned.

(12) I saw *a* cat. *The* cat chased the mouse.

(13) Saya membeli mobil. **Mobilnya** berwarna merah.

When referring to unique entities (moon, sun, earth, or sky), English speaker will directly use *the* before the noun. It is believed that unique entity is only one in this world so that it must be a definite entity. Meanwhile, Indonesian does not have the concept of unique entity. It has no special marker for signaling the definiteness of unique entity (although sometimes *-nya* is used).

(14) The sun is shining.

(15) Matahari bersinar.

(15a) Mataharinya bersinar.

Teacher must consider these characteristics and start to introduce it to the learner (student). It will aid the learner to improve better understanding on language itself and that each language possesses specific properties, despite the universal properties shared among languages.

### The Teaching of Passive Construction

Linguistic construction also includes the construction as the result of transformation as of passive sentence. According to Chung (in Kaswanti Purwo, 1989:2), Passive is one of universal features of (human) languages. She



mentioned two types of passive, namely canonical passive and object-preposing passive. English is basically an active language so it only has one passive, the canonical one (16a).

(16) The cat chased the mouse.

(16a) The mouse is chased by the cat.

On the contrary, Indonesian has two passive forms: canonical passive (17a) and (17b), although (17a) is rarely found but it is still grammatical and semantically acceptable.

(17) *Saya membaca buku itu.*

(17a) *Buku itu dibaca oleh saya.*

(17b) *Buku itu saya baca.*

In addition, Kroeger proposes adversative passive in Indonesian (Malay) language (2005:279) as in sentence (18). This *ke-/an* passive is as the interference of Javanese (Poedjosoedarmo, 1982:59).

(18) *Ali kejatuhan kelapa.*

(19) *Ali ketiban kelopo.*

English language teacher or lecturer must note the uniqueness of Indonesian passive constructions when teaching passive voice in English with morphologically richer compared to Indonesian.

### 3. The Benefits of Having Sufficient Linguistic Typology Knowledge in English Language Teaching

The use of cross-linguistic perspectives in English language teaching will be of some benefits. First, it is inevitable that the understanding of cross-linguistic knowledge will provide sufficient basis of explaining the characteristics of a language being taught and a language that is influencing the learner. By knowing the characters of each language, both teacher and learner will put aside the egocentrism of thinking in their native tongue when speaking or writing in foreign language. To perfectly master English, one must think in English, and it can only be understood if they know that English and Indonesian, for instance, are two discrete languages.

Another benefit point is related to understanding of the nature of the language. In learning a language, human beings must be positioned as a *rationale animal* distinguished from other automata such as animals or machines which belong to *monism* things. It is impossible to just give language input as in computer software; there is more to human beings. According to Descartes, mankind comprises dualism, mind and body, in his formulation 'I think, therefore I am' (Robson and Stockwell, 2005:17). In this extent, language belongs to the system of mind, the logical way of thinking. Learners must be given chances to use their mind a lot, including in comprehending what language is and how language actually works. Giving mere rules to the learners without understanding the nature of the list of rules is like treating them as machines.

Through the ages, language learners are presented with rules of analogy and anomaly in language. Why is it such analogy or anomaly? Learners are not familiar yet with the question 'why' in language classroom. The copula *be* in English, take as an example, cannot be found in Indonesian. English learners from Indonesia would likely to find it difficult to use *be* in equative clauses. It would raise a question 'why does English have copula *be* while Indonesian does not possess it? Now it is getting clear that language class is not merely about explaining rules, but also giving insights behind the rules. Teacher enriched with linguistic typology knowledge would not find it confusing to be open-minded in explaining linguistic phenomena. On the other hand, learner will also get more insights about the object of their study: language.

One of the significant benefits is dealing with the constraints in learning process. If the teacher possesses linguistic knowledge and the learner (student) understands the characteristics of the language, the learner is able to recognize the constraints they face and the reason as well. Hence, teacher and learner are possible to find the best to overcome them.

### CONCLUSION

As part of linguistics field, language teaching cannot obviously be put in an independent position, apart from linguistic theories. There are some basic understanding on language and the characteristic of the languages that teacher should master and students should know in order to make the language classroom a comprehensive language teaching practice. By so doing, language teaching will not deal with how to master the language, but how to master the language and understand the characteristics of the language either. Mastering the language without knowing the nature of the language will make the learner look like a machine.

The understanding of cross-linguistic perspectives (linguistic typology) is of some benefits in language teaching. The teacher is able to explain the reason behind language phenomena or linguistic constraint and they student soon figure out why they cannot produce exactly the same construction as the native speaker of the language. At last, all language teachers will realize the relevance and the importance of linguistics in the teaching (and indeed in learning) of a language. Hopefully, in the future, they are not going to exclude linguistics from their teaching practice.

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