

STUDENTS' BASIC PROBLEMS IN LEARNING ENGLISH: MASTERING VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR

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Abstract: *Learning English for Indonesian students is the necessity since they have been in elementary school to higher education. However, many students consider English difficult although they have been learnt English for years. Such condition motivates the writer to research the problem the students have. The writer believes that comprehending the students' problem in learning English help them to teach in a better manner because the writer has known to solve the students' problem.*

Keywords: *language learning, problems, and difficulty*

Abstrak: *mempelajari Bahasa Inggris sudah menjadi suatu keharusan bagi para siswa di Indonesia sejak mereka duduk di bangku Sekolah Menengah Pertama sampai di Perguruan Tinggi. Namun demikian masih banyak mahasiswa yang menganggap Bahasa Inggris sebagai mata kuliah yang sulit walau mereka telah mempelajarinya selama bertahun-tahun. Hal ini mendorong penulis untuk meneliti apa kesulitan atau masalah yang para mahasiswa hadapi dalam belajar bahasa Inggris. Penulis percaya bahwa mengetahui kesulitan dan masalah yang mahasiswa hadapi akan membantu penulis untuk mengajar lebih baik khususnya karena penulis menjadi lebih tahu akan materi dan latihan yang memang benar-benar mereka butuhkan untuk mengatasi kesulitan dan masalah yang mereka miliki pada saat mempelajari bahasa Inggris.*

Kata kunci: *pembelajaran bahasa, masalah, dan kesulitan.*

INTRODUCTION

Serving as an international language English is continuously getting its place within the education in Indonesia and many other countries. Though it is not the only foreign language learnt in Indonesia, English has already become a compulsory subject in the secondary schools. Even, it is taught in both English Departments and Non-English Departments in universities, and therefore it can be said that English is learnt by all students studying in universities.

Though English is learnt from the secondary schools, a large number of students still consider English as one of the most

difficult subjects to learn. This makes the writer interested in researching why those students rarely change their opinions about English. Besides, this common view of English also arises the writer's interest to find out what problems are actually felt by those students.

As the writer is majoring on the teaching of English as a foreign language, the writer always has the enquiry on how to make the students love English. She really wants to prove that learning English is actually not difficult. By saying this, the writer does not mean to say that English learning is simple, but she would like to say that to some extent

the learning of English can be made easier despite a number of differences found between English and Indonesian.

In this case, the writer believes that problems of learning English surely always become inevitable parts accompanying the students' learning process. The learning of English itself, of course, requires high motivation from the learners as it is not always easy to master English. Moreover, English teachers, as a result, should help the learners in overcoming the problems they encounter within their learning or at least they try to minimize the problems faced by their students. To be able to do so, it is necessary for them to research the learning problems the students have since they will not be able to help their students learn English well unless they know what problems are really felt by the students.

Furthermore, when conducting research focusing on the students' problems in learning English should become a great interest for the English teachers, the writer believes that those teachers of English can really teach better. This is so as they will be able to deliver the right material which meets the students' needs. Next, they will be able to facilitate their students' learning as well since they know the kinds of practices that their students should have so that they really master the material. Also, they will be able to present such kind of tricks and tips on how to learn some parts of the language that their students feel difficult. Sometimes, mnemonic can be used to help the students in remembering the material they are learning. This has been proven by the writer herself especially when she taught in her classes. When she knew her students' problems of learning English, she could help her students better in solving the problems.

Once, the writer encountered an interesting experience when she taught in the Prose class. She never got a question from the students although she always gave the opportunity to her students in her class. This happened almost in every meeting that she

conducted. This was strange as the writer believed that her students must have some questions related to the material taught. They never joined Prose class before and the writer could see some of the students got confused in learning the material. Therefore, she tried to interview some of her students outside the class and then it was revealed that they never asked questions as they were afraid of making wrong interrogative sentences. Then she tried to prove whether the students really faced problems in making the interrogative sentences. She asked them to make several questions about the novel they read and finally she could prove that her students really had difficulty in making the questions. Many of them use the word "What" to mean "Apakah" although apakah in English may vary depending on the tenses used. One example shows that students get confused in choosing the right word for *Apakah*. They wrote *What did Crusoe return home after his first voyage?* instead of *Did Crusoe return home after his first voyage?* when they were trying to say *Apakah Crusoe kembali ke rumahnya setelah pelayarannya yang pertama?*

This kind of experience motivates the writer to conduct a research dealing with the students' problems in learning English. The latest research conducted by the writer also dealt with the students' problems in learning English. It was carried out in the Economics Faculty of Pekalongan University.

This research was conducted in the Accountings Department and the participants were the first semester students of the evening class. The class was chosen as the sample as it was attended mostly by the employees or workers and in the first meeting almost all students said that English was difficult. As a matter of fact, teaching English in this class required the lecturer to be more patient, more active and more communicative in delivering the subject. This is so as the students who were mainly employees and had already got tired after all

day long working. Furthermore, to make her teaching effective, she tried to conduct a research on learning problems faced by her students. She carried out her research in September 2012 as it was the beginning of the odd semester of the academic year of 2012/2013. The objectives were to find the main problems faced by each student in learning English and to find out the problems faced by the majority of her students within one class.

It is undeniable that English has got its global status. It is proven by the fact that English is used as both an official language and a foreign language. This goes along with what is stated by Crystal (1997) in McKay, Sandra Lee (2002:5) in which he explains that a language achieves global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country and that this special status can be achieved either by making it an official language of the country or by a country giving a special priority to English as requiring its study as a foreign language. Therefore, as English becomes an international language, it should be studied

although the learning process results in the confusion or problems.

Lado (1961:17) in Dwi Agustina (2007: 2) states that learning a target language will result in problems especially when the language being learned is different from the students' mother tongue. It means that there must be problems in every language learning although the level of difficulty felt by the learners may vary from one to another. Therefore, researching the problems or difficulty faced by the students in their language learning is worth to conduct since the problems or difficulty always become parts of their learning processes.

RESEARCH METHOD

As the research was only to discover the students' problem in learning English, the writer applied a descriptive research and she

made use of a simple questionnaire to collect her data. There were 44 students becoming the research participants. They were all the evening class students who mostly had already worked. The data gathered were then analyzed. She hoped to be able to use her research findings as the input in conducting her teaching and learning activities in her class, especially to help the learners both in solving their problems and in learning the language better.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The research findings show that each student faced various problems in learning English although they had already learnt it for more than six years. The number of problems mentioned by the students ranged from 1 to 5 on average. The problems varied from problems in mastering the four language skills to those in mastering the language elements. They were problems in listening, speaking, reading and writing, learning the vocabulary, mastering grammar, pronouncing the words and producing translation. Overall, there were 8 different problems mentioned by the students and each student faced 3 problems on the average. The following table shows the percentage of the number of students facing each problem.

The above table shows that problems faced by the students were vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, translation, writing, speaking, listening, and reading respectively. It is also clear that the mastery of vocabulary and grammar becomes the two biggest problems in learning the target language. Thus, if the mastery of those two language elements is enhanced, it will surely help the students master the language. In other words, vocabulary and grammar mastery becomes the key in the language learning of the Accountings students.

Table 1. The number of students and the problems they faced in learning English

No	Problems	Number of students	Percentage
1	Listening	8	18.2 %
2	Speaking	11	25.0 %
3	Reading	4	9.1 %
4	Writing	15	34.1 %
5	Vocabulary	21	47.7 %
6	Grammar	19	43.2 %
7	Pronunciation	18	40.1 %
8	Translation	18	40.1 %

(Dwi Agustina, 2012)

Based on the students' answer above, it seems to be true that vocabulary is hard to master. The way to write the words and the way to be read are different. Thus it may result in the difficulty of memorizing both the spelling and pronunciation or how to read those words.

It is also reasonable that the students answered that their biggest problem in learning English is their low mastery of grammar and vocabulary. For, the mastery of vocabulary, Thornbury (2002: 27) states that there are several factors that make some words seem more difficult than others. They are *first*, pronunciation. He adds that research findings have shown that words which are more difficult to pronounce are more difficult to learn. This results from the clusters of consonants found in many English words, such as *strength*, *crisps* and *breakfast*. *Secondly*, spelling appears to be the cause of errors which contribute to difficulty in learning a word. The students usually encounter some difficulties in spelling and pronouncing words containing silent letters. The examples of those words are *foreign*, *listen*, *headache*, *climbing*, *bored*, *honest*, and *muscle*. Next, grammar of phrasal verbs also becomes the problematic parts of students' vocabulary learning. Some phrasal verbs are separable like in the sentence

He picks me up but others are not, like in the example *She gets into the car*.

Another factor contributing to the difficulty in learning vocabulary is the meaning of word. Thornbury (2002) explains that when two words overlap in meaning, students usually get confused. The words like *make* and *do* are the examples. In Indonesian, it often happens that the students translate "*membuat pekerjaan rumah*" into *making the homework* instead of *doing the homework*.

The last factor resulting in the problems of vocabulary learning is the range, connotations, and idiomaticity. Based on Thornbury's example in his book *How to Teach Vocabulary* (2002:28), words with a wider range will be easier to learn. For example the word "put" is very wide ranging verb compared to the words *impose*, *place* or *position*. Connotations may cause problems as well. For instance, *propaganda* has negative connotation in English, but its equivalent may mean simply *publicity*.

Finally, Thornbury adds that idiomatic expression will be more difficult to learn than words whose meaning is transparent. This goes along with what the writer experienced in teaching idioms to her students in English Education Department in Pekalongan University. The students often get confused when they learn idioms and find that the meanings of the idiomatic expressions are much different from their literal meanings. Once she introduced the expression *as cool as cucumber* to the students. She wrote a sentence, *The man is as cool as cucumber*. Then the students proudly translate the sentence into *Pria itu sedingin mentimun*. In fact, the translation should be *Pria itu sangat tenang*. From this example, it is obvious that students will translate the idiomatic expressions incorrectly especially if they do not know the meaning of the idioms.

Another example can be seen from the writer's students' answer when they translated the expression *sedia payung sebelum hujan*.

Some students translate that expression into *prepare umbrella before raining*. This is ironic of course when the students' of language education cannot translate this kind of expression correctly.

One more example the writer has is the wrong translation of the Indonesian expression: *musuh dalam selimut*. It happened that her students translated it into *enemy in the blanket* instead of *snake in the grass*. It can be inferred, then, that learning vocabulary is far from being simple as it requires more than knowing the literal meaning of the words.

Next, holding the belief that the key in learning English is the mastery of its vocabulary and grammar English teachers or lecturers need to find the way to help learners master those two language elements. The explanation given by Thornbury should be used to consider the methods of teaching as well as to determine the material for the students. In the simplest way, teachers of English should help the learners to minimize the problems in learning the language elements above.

Furthermore, having got the results of the students' problems in learning English, the writer used all the information to prepare all the materials which suit the students' needs. The writer then introduced relevant vocabulary for her students in each lecture. Besides, when she gave a reading passage, she always explained the construction of the sentences so that the students could translate the sentences correctly. Sometimes she asked the students to read the sentences aloud especially when she wanted to give the pronunciation practices. One thing she also did was introducing the derivation or the way words are formed and how each class of words is used within the sentences. This kind of practice improves not only students' vocabulary mastery but also grammar mastery. Therefore, the writer really gave the materials and practices which were needed by her students.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

From the research findings that the writer had, it can be concluded that students really have problems or difficulty in learning the target language. In the research conducted by the writer it is clear that students' problem in learning English varied; however, their main problems were in vocabulary and grammar mastery. Students believed that it would be able to speak or write well if *first*, they know a wide range of words they are going to use to express their feeling, thought and ideas, and *second*, if they know how to arrange those words into grammatically correct sentences. Consequently, mastering English vocabulary and grammar becomes a basic need for the students in order to master English.

In fact, it is true that knowing more vocabulary will make the students have the ability in expressing their ideas verbally and they may also have better understanding in reading English text. However, this must also be accompanied by the mastery of English grammar since grammar mastery will help them to arrange their words into meaningful grammatically correct sentences to express their ideas and feelings. Moreover, by mastering English grammar, they will be able to know the constructions of the sentences they read in the English texts and this will help them understand the content of the text better.

Furthermore, knowing the grammar and the vocabulary of English will result in the ability in producing a wide range of novel sentences which may be used either in spoken or written communication. Besides, the mastery of these language elements will assist the learner to translate sentences from the target language into the source language and vice versa. Also, it will certainly facilitate the learning of the four language skill in English, namely speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Despite the benefits of knowing more English vocabulary that the students may get, it is imperative to carefully define what is meant by knowing English vocabulary or English words. Many people still have difficulty in giving the explanation of the meaning of knowing English words. It is then necessary to refer this matter to the language experts' theories so that there is a clear idea on the meaning of "knowing the vocabulary or words."

Lado (1974:116) in his book *Language Teaching* states that all people know the limited vocabulary. None of us know all words of a language completely. He adds that knowing the vocabulary of a language is hard to define since it deals with so many aspects such as the size of the vocabulary, the degree of the knowledge required, and whether the vocabulary is for speaking, listening, reading, writing, and or for special technical uses.

From what Lado explains, it can be said that it will be far for being simple in measuring someone's mastery of vocabulary. Take for an example, within a class consisting 40 students, a student may have different vocabulary mastery from his friends' mastery of vocabulary. There will be a great possibility that one knows words that his friends do not know and of course the other way around.

In addition to what has been stated by Lado, here Thornbury (2002:15) adds that at the most basic level, knowing a word involves knowing its forms and its meaning. Knowing the forms of the words deals with knowing the word classes of those words, whether it belongs to nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions or determiners. This kind of knowledge will get improved as students master English grammar since grammatical function will surely determine the form of a word used within a sentence. Next, Thornbury adds his explanation that knowing the meaning of a word is not merely knowing its dictionary meaning(s), however it also means knowing the words commonly

associated with it (its collocations) as well as its connotations, including its register, and its cultural accretions (Thornbury; 2002:15).

Next, based on the result of the writer's research, there are some suggestions that the writer would like to give to both students who are learning English and teachers of English. First, for the students who are learning English the writer would like to suggest that:

1. Learning English always requires high motivation; therefore those studying English should have the enthusiasm in learning the language. Holding the belief that English can be mastered will be helpful. It will arise the motivation to continue the learning until it is mastered well;
2. Everyone learning English always face the difficulty and problems in learning the language and thus it is normal for you if you are having a large number of problems when you learn English;
3. Making mistakes are parts of the learning processes. It is natural to make mistakes and by having practices you will be able to minimize the same mistakes;
4. Trying to have personal strategies and tips in learning the language will be useful for your own progress in mastering the language. For example, you can relate the English words with the ads on television especially if you want to have certain vocabulary. Or, you can remember the lyric of the song and how each word is pronounced by the singer especially when you are learning the vocabulary. You can also record your own voice if you want to check whether your sentences are grammatically correct or not;
5. Vocabulary can be mastered well if you use it frequently. The more you use the words the more familiar they are to you and it means the easier for you to remember their meanings;
6. Grammar also can be learnt easily. You can use your computer while learning

how to produce grammatically correct sentences. You can type some sentences on your computer and then you can use grammar and spelling checker to see whether your sentences are already correct. If they contain some grammatical mistakes your computer will help you to correct them.

Following those suggestions for the students learning English, the writer would like to give some suggestions for the English teachers, especially in helping the students learn English better.

1. Knowing the problems that the students faced will be useful since the teachers can, then, arrange the teaching and learning activities which can address those problems. Therefore, researching what difficulties or problems the students have in learning English is a must in each class that the teachers have;
2. Introducing relevant vocabulary in each meeting of the lesson is also a good warming up activity. The teachers can help the students to increase the quantity of words that they know by introducing new words continuously. Teachers can use some ads on television to introduce some words;
3. Teaching basic grammar of English in the language class is necessary. This is to give the students basic knowledge of how the words can be arranged into sentences. This will help the students as well in their translation of a reading text. Only if they know the construction of the sentences that they will be able to translate them into correct and meaningful sentences in different language;
4. Giving more practices on the parts of the materials or language elements or skills that the students face most problems will really help them to solve the problems. Like the proverb 'practice makes perfect', the teachers should facilitate the students

to really minimize their problems in learning English by giving more practices;

5. Giving the strategies or tips for mastering the language skills and language elements will make the students believe that the language can be mastered easier;
6. Motivating the students that English is important to learn is necessary too. By explaining the benefits of mastering English in some aspects of life will convince the students that English is a language that they need in their life.

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