



Early Language Exposure for Better Acquisition of English in Indonesia: A Narrative Study

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Abstract. Being proficient in English is a necessity in this globalized era. However, people in many countries are still struggling hard to achieve adequate mastery of English, including Indonesia. While most Indonesian people have low proficiency in English, even those having majored in it at university, there are people who managed to master the language very well despite not having an English education background. This paper aims to uncover the strategies and life experiences of a competent English user with such a phenomenon. The data of this study were collected using phenomenological interviews with a purposely selected participant. The data were then analyzed using the narrative qualitative data analysis as proposed by Miles et al. (2014). The findings indicate that acquisition of a foreign language can be optimized through early contextual and meaningful use of the language in one's familial contexts, ample and continuous exposure to English based on one's interests from an early age. These findings can be used as a basis for designing programs to improve and accelerate the acquisition of English at the family and institutional levels.

Keywords: English Proficiency · Language Acquisition · Indonesian Context · TEYL

1 Introduction

Education First (EF) holds an annual English Proficiency Index (EPI) rank, measuring hundreds of countries that have at least 400 test takers of the EF Standard English Test. In 2020, EF EPI measured the English skills of 100 countries, based on test results of two million adults. Placing first was the Netherlands, and Tajikistan was in the last of the 100 whereas Indonesia ranked 74th alongside Bahrain and Morocco, falling into the category of 'Low Proficiency Band'. Even when compared to other Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia is still under-average, placing 5th out of 8 countries participating in the EPI ranking. This looks very bad especially when the two closest countries ranked very high. Malaysia placed 30th, almost making it into the 'High Proficiency Band' and Singapore placed 10th, the highest of all Asian countries, and fell under the category of 'Very High Proficiency Band' [1].

Another way to measure someone's English proficiency is through standardized international tests, such as IELTS, TOEIC, or the most commonly used in Indonesia,

TOEFL. According to Saukah (2000) [2], the average TOEFL score of academics in English departments around Indonesia was 473. In line with this, the official TOEFL website, ets.org, published “Test and Score Data Summary for the TOEFL ITP Test” for the year of 2020 [3]. It shows that the average TOEFL score of Indonesian people is 479, even though there are so many of them attending TOEFL courses in order to try and improve their scores.

This paper aims to share how someone can have a relatively good language proficiency (which is proven by his performance in the TOEFL) using a narrative inquiry from one of the writers regarding how he learned/acquired English as a child, since his earliest TOEFL score tested in August 2014 was 540. And his latest score tested in March 2021 was 620, without ever attending any TOEFL courses.

This study is intended to help in describing some issues found in the English learning/acquisition process in Indonesia, and findings from the analysis of the narrative inquiry was made to be the basis of the suggestions for parents who wish to improve their children’s proficiency in English starting from an early age. It can also be taken into consideration for teachers who wish to develop study plans and integrate these findings to improve English language teaching in the classroom.

2 English Language Issues in Indonesia

2.1 How English is Viewed as a Language

Indonesia is a country with a huge variety of cultures and ethnicities. Within those diverse cultures, there are a lot of vernaculars. This is a reason why Indonesians do not gravitate towards English as their second language. Most Indonesians already speak two languages. Let us compare this to countries near Indonesia. Malaysians have Malay as their official national language, but they practically have English as their second language. Singaporeans mainly speak English, alongside Mandarin and Malay. The use of English on a daily basis for these countries is a strong factor in why they rank very high in the EF EPI.

2.2 Primary and Secondary Socialization

Primary socialization is defined as the socialization that happens throughout one’s early life as a child. Mainly happens through direct family, this is the time where a child learns about the norms, values, and beliefs of their family. Whereas secondary socialization is “the socialization that takes place throughout one’s life, both as a child and as one encounters new groups that require additional socialization.” Like when a child goes to school and socializes with all their new friends who come from different families that have different cultures and hold different beliefs [4].

The problem that occurs in primary socialization is related to the culture and language one’s family has in Indonesia. Since their early lives, parents speak to their children in Indonesian and/or their respective local languages. In addition, it is common to have an ethnic group having more than one type of vernacular. Take the Javanese for example. Although this ethnic group is said to speak Javanese, the language itself is divided into

3 different levels, based on the level of politeness. Kromo is the politest one, Madyo is the less polite, and Ngoko is the least polite. These language levels have really different vocabularies. Although not all Javanese families teach all three languages to their children, nevertheless a child growing up in a Javanese family would be able to speak at least 2 languages, if not 4.

There is a particular phenomenon where people of a multicultural and multilingual community have been dismissed in trying to speak English in their community, and speaking in their mother tongue would receive better responses. In this case, people being spoken to in English might think that the speaker is trying to show off [5]. A similar phenomenon in Indonesia was described in the narrative inquiry in the next section.

If we look into formal education in Indonesia, especially in primary to secondary school, English subject is not taught fully in English. English teachers are found to lack confidence and are not very fluent in English. The limited proficiency of many English teachers causes most of the lessons to not be given in English, but in Indonesian instead [6]. This is an issue because the students would not look up to the teacher as a model, and this may leave them unmotivated to learn English in the long run.

3 Narrative Inquiry and Findings

Looking into the childhood experience of the 1st writer, although he was from a Javanese family, he grew up in an English-friendly environment that supports English language acquisition very early in his life. When he was 3 years old, his father would always ask him in English, “How are you?” and his father would tap him on the shoulder and say, “Good, thank you. And you?” then put his hand on his own chest and said, “Good, thank you.” The 3-year-old child didn’t understand any of it. Why is his father talking to himself? What is he saying? But now it is understood that it was his way of teaching basic greetings. And the body language, and the hand gestures, was him trying to teach how the turn-taking should happen in a proper conversation. Children at that age won’t be able to understand complex instructions or questions. But, with short and simple sentences, plus the proper gestures, you can teach a 3-year-old how greetings in another language happen properly.

Another thing his father always did was gesture open palms and ask “can I have some?” when he was snacking. And whenever he gives his father some of the snacks, his father would say thank you and not leave until he receives a “you’re welcome” from him.

Another story told is when he played with an Australian neighbor around the same age. He wanted to borrow one of his friend’s toys. But at that time, he didn’t know the word “borrow”, so he said “can I have some?” expecting his friend to lend him a toy. But of course, his friend doesn’t let him take the toy. He ran home crying to his parents. After explaining what happened, his parents laughed. And after calming him down, they taught him to say the word “borrow” next time he would want to borrow something. It’s an unforgettable story and also an important lesson. Making mistakes and being humiliated is a good way to learn. But parents need to make sure that their children don’t get discouraged and tell them that they must try again.

As a child, one of his hobbies was watching cartoons and TV shows for kids. You might be familiar with shows like Blue's Clues, or Dora the Explorer. These are great shows for your children to watch because these are interactive shows where they would ask the viewers short and simple questions. They use basic English sentences and therefore it is easier for children to process. The writer would even say that Dora and Steve were his first English teachers.

When he was 5 years old in kindergarten, he was given a chance to become an English MC for a small event in his classroom. Even though he didn't have the proper skills to be an MC, since he was just reading the event rundown, the experience gave him a boost of confidence in public speaking. An important part of language use, especially in speaking, is having the courage and confidence to speak.

Video games also play a huge role in his journey of English language acquisition. At 6 years old he started playing video games like Pokemon, where sometimes you can get lost or stuck without any progress when you miss a prompt or hint from the NPC. When that happens, there aren't many things you can do but cluelessly go around the map until somehow you luckily arrive at the destination you're supposed to go to.

When he was around 9 years old, access to the internet from school gets easier, and that was a huge deal in terms of English input for him. Many students including him would browse the internet for lyrics to western popular songs. Memorizing the lyrics to a song became a trend among students. Sometimes when there is a word that he doesn't understand, he would look that word up in the dictionary because the online translation wasn't very well known at that time. And since there was an internet connection, whenever he got stuck in a video game, he would search for walkthroughs, i.e., guides of the game, written by other people. At the time, reading guides in English was not a difficult task for him.

From elementary to junior high school, he participated in a lot of English speech competitions hosted by the school. Preparing for the speech materials helped him practice writing, and performing the speeches on stage allowed him to practice public speaking.

Then came the era of social media. With his own mobile phone and access to 2G internet which was only enough to access Facebook, he started writing status updates. Sometimes in Indonesian, sometimes in English. Here's a status update from October 11th, 2011. Which means he was 13 years old at the time.

“Physics... It would have been much easier if “tree” instead of “apple” falls to Newton's head...”

Constructing a compound sentence like this, even with a few minor mistakes near the end, is not something that an average 13-year-old Indonesian can do.

In the course of his school life, from elementary school to senior high school, he aced the English subject every year, never having a score lower than 95 on his report cards. This is also reflected in his TOEFL scores. Yet interestingly, when asked about syntactic or grammatical rules of the English language, he is not able to explain them. When doing the TOEFL test in the grammar/structure section, he does not have a set 'rule' to guide him in choosing the right answer. The best way to explain how he picks the answer is “If it sounds good in his head, then it must be the correct answer.”

He also mentioned several stories that discouraged him from using English. One of the stories that stand out was a physics teacher who dismissed him for using English, saying that English isn't necessary when you're learning a different subject in school. Another issue he found was when he was a freshman in college. He frequently code switches between Indonesian and English around his friend. He received negative responses, saying that changing languages in his speech shows that he does not have a complete understanding of English, and it only makes him look dumb. These cases made him rethink the decision of using English for a while, but fortunately did not stop him from continuing to learn English, and eventually, he stopped caring about such comments.

4 Discussion

Looking into the childhood experience of the 1st writer, although he was from a Javanese household, he grew up in an English-friendly environment that supports English language acquisition very early in his life. When he was 3 years old, his father would always ask him in English, "How are you?" There are two important points from the narrative regarding how to successfully acquire the English language, which we will describe further later on. Acquiring the English language well would require a person to (1) receive a lot of proper input, and (2) practice by producing a lot of output.

It is worth mentioning the phenomenon where the writer can correctly answer TOEFL grammar/structure questions yet he cannot explain why they are the correct answers. Skinner (1957) [7] proposes the idea that like how every other human learning occurs, language acquisition is a kind of habit formation as a result of Stimuli-Response-Reinforcement. So, the phenomenon that happened to him was due to the fact that he has acquired enough input, produced enough output, and received enough feedback to form some kind of pattern in his head that would address whether a sentence being read is correct or incorrect. This is also in line with Krashen's (1982) [8] monitor hypothesis of the monitor model, where the language system acquired is monitored by the language system learned. At first, he didn't think that there is a set "rule" to the language he acquired. But after learning about some of the grammatical rules and structures from school, it started to make sense. The grammar he learned from school is then used to fix minor mistakes and ultimately polish the language system he acquired.

4.1 Input

In the earlier part of the narrative, as a child, the writer received a short and simple language input. Like "How are you?" or "Can I have some?" with added gestures. As he grew up, during elementary school times, the input became more complex. He began listening to music while reading the lyrics. He also started reading video game walkthroughs, which are basically a series of instructions you need to follow in order to properly progress in the video game. This is in line with several studies that show that according to the age group of the child, educators need to adjust the length and complexity of instructions or questions [9]. A piece of advice is 'useless complex words and shorter sentences for young children so that they can easily process them.'

Parents don't need to worry about their children having "too many languages to study", and whether or not teaching English to their children is "too early" for them. The writer grew up in a Javanese household, with his parents speaking Indonesian and Ngoko Javanese to him, yet he still managed to acquire English well. This proves that children, from their early age, are able to acquire multiple languages in the same period of time. According to Saviile-Troike [10], this is called simultaneous multilingualism.

Studies show that playing video games or consuming content like cartoons, movies, and TV shows in the target language are great sources of language input and can help students to learn English [11, 12]. Teachers and parents might be worried that video games and cartoons will give a negative influence on children. This is not always the case. Let children consume 'content' in the target language and you will be surprised at how much it helps children to acquire that new language.

Another hypothesis from Krashen's monitor model is called the input hypothesis [7]. The idea is that acquisition occurs when one is exposed to language that is one level higher than what they can comprehend. One might be able to understand a whole sentence even when there's one word in that sentence that they are not familiar with. Combine with learning, they can look up the words they don't understand in the dictionary. This will help them understand the sentences better, and ultimately polish their comprehension skills further by having new vocabularies.

4.2 Output

Gass (2008) states "there is no better way to test the extent of one's knowledge (linguistic or otherwise) than to have to use that knowledge in some productive way" [13]. This stresses the importance of practicing output in order to know how much knowledge of the language a learner has. As the learner, what needs to be done is practice a lot. But as a parent or teacher, what can we do to assist them to practice?

Providing an English-friendly environment is very important. A study by Hansen & Broekhuizen shows that a good language learning environment can promote children's vocabulary development [14]. And although there are a lot of ways to practice English outputs, if the environment itself is not English-friendly, then responses like those from language gatekeepers are to be expected. And it would be very discouraging for the learner to keep practicing English.

While providing input to children, teachers and parents can try to fish for responses in English. Like the writer's father who refused to leave after saying "thank you" until he replies with "you're welcome."

Indulging in monologue-types of practice, such as writing diaries, journals, or even ranting on social media, can be a nice side practice for the learners to do. The downside of this is that there will be no feedback to correct them when they make mistakes.

Practical experience is just as important as other forms of output practice. Like in the narrative, participating in speech competitions will be a valuable public speaking experience for young learners as well as a good way to practice. Another great competition for teenagers is debate competition. Debate competitions can train young learners' comprehensive listening skills as well as construct coherent arguments before explaining the idea to the other team.

English teachers can provide students with a practical and more authentic experience of using English by providing them with task-based instructions [15].

5 Conclusion and Suggestions

To conclude, it's never too soon for a child to start acquiring a language. The earlier a child starts getting exposure to a certain language, provided that the input given is proper, the better they will become at using the language in the long run.

Parents may consider exposing their children to English as early as possible, they need not to worry about children being overwhelmed because of learning "too many languages", and let their children consume appropriate content if it is in English. Cartoons are not always bad for them.

Teachers need to become good models for their students. Improve their own English proficiency, provide lessons more in English instead of Indonesian, experiment by giving students experiential tasks/assignments, and do not shut down their enthusiasm when learning English.

And in general, those who wish to teach English should provide natural communicative inputs for the learners, and encourage the usage of the target language.

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