# A MULTI-LANGUAGE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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## ABSTRACT

Many people learn English. Many have learned it for a quite long time. Those who graduated from Senior High Schools have formally learned it for 12 years. Those who graduated from universities have formally learned it for 16 years. Others have learned the language even longer. Some have succeeded, but many of them claim that they have failed especially when their ability to speak the language is to be questioned.

The reason why many students cannot speak English in and outside the classroom is first because they do not try to use it. They are "passive" students. They come to class with no attempt to use it for communication. They only listen to the teacher who unfortunately is very dominant while conducting the teaching learning process. Outside the classroom, the situation is even worse for no English-speaking community is found.

Second, many students do not and cannot use English because they are reluctant to use the language in the "only-English situation." They are actually linguistically ready. They have had the knowledge of English grammar, a sufficient stock of English vocabulary, and the ability to pronounce the words, but they are not mentally ready. They have no courage to speak English in the situation in which only English is required—the only-English situation.

It is imperative that only-English situation is important for at this situation every participant of the conversation is "forced" to speak in English regardless of their weaknesses, mistakes, shortcomings, and so on. However, as commonly found, many learners often avoid participating in this situation. They tend to use Indonesian or Javanese instead. For this reason, a conducive environment needs to be created. It is an environment where participants of the conversation are allowed to use languages other than English, i.e., Indonesian, Javanese, and other languages which the conversation participants are familiar with. It is a multi-language English learning environment which can be developed in and outside the classroom.

**Introduction**

Language is a means of communication (Clark and Clark, 1977; Lim, 1975). As a means of communication, language is inseparable from the society who uses it. It is a means to deliver and interpret messages. So when people learn a language, a communication skill is foremost. When learning a foreign language (English, Japanese, German, or any other foreign language) almost all learners want to be able to speak it right from the start. Only a few want to be able to read or write in it.

The importance of speaking skill, especially English, is undeniable. In practice, however, the teaching of English at schools often neglects this particular skill, not because this skill does not have to be taught, but because it is difficult to be taught. Officially, the teaching of English in Indonesia must stress the four skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2004). Yet, this stress has not produced a satisfactory result. Many learners fail not only in their attempts to learn to read, but also to learn the other three skills. They fail because they do not learn what they want to learn. The teaching does not fulfill their needs.

Learning a language is different from learning mathematics. When learning mathematics, learners often do not have to speak. When learning mathematics, in whatever language mathematics is learned, the ability to speak is not considered as important as when they learn English. When learning English, speaking is important not only as the goal, but also as the means. In addition, as stated by Chomsky (1965; 1986), a language is acquired differently. Language learning is different from any other learning because a language is composed of separate power of minds. Mentalists' theories assume the existence of the dominance of inherited power and learner contribution in the learning process. The acquisition of language cannot be "pushed" on to the learners, but only facilitated.

The ability to speak in any language is very important because every human want to communicate, especially, orally. Everyone wants to communicate orally (speaking), but not everyone wants to communicate in a written form (writing). The learning of a language is therefore motivating if it stresses the ability to speak. In the discussion that follows, however, this point will not be debated since this paper is intended to demonstrate how the ability to speak English can be learned and has been successfully learned informally—outside the classroom setting (Susanto, 2004).

The discussion below is based on the belief that the learning of English speaking ability, both done in the school setting or outside the school setting, is not a failure. What has actually been experienced by most learners is that they do not or never use the

language because of the absence of the environment that facilitates it. In other words, the ability to speak English can be learned, improved, and maintained if it is not learned in a English speaking environment only, but rather in an environment where other languages are also used. English must be actively spoken anytime, anywhere, in everyday life, and simultaneously with the use of the national language (Indonesian) and the local languages (Madurese, Javanese, etc.).

**Language Acquisition**

Language acquisition is a process of language mastery by a language speaker that is facilitated by continuous exposures of the language in a natural setting (Wilkins, 1974). Krashen (1977; 1981) explains the concept of second language acquisition by comparing it with the way a child acquires his mother tongue. A child, in acquiring his mother tongue, processes the language naturally and ignores the grammatical rules that exist in the language. Acquisition differs from learning in that the first is done "unconsciously" in a natural setting, while the latter is done with "full awareness" in a formal setting or schools.

In acquiring his mother tongue, a child involves himself and is involved in day-to-day activities within a small group of people that commonly consists of at least a father, a mother, brother, and/or sister, if any, and some close relatives. A child, within his early age, can demonstrate the unusual mastery of his mother tongue through listening to language exposures and then repeating what he hears. A child who is exposed to a certain linguistic environment can successfully acquire the language he is exposed to. Even when he is exposed to two or even three different linguistic environments, he can acquire them all. The short dialog ever recorded below exemplifies a three-year-old child who could "speak" three languages since she was exposed to the use of Indonesian, Javanese, and English from television at the same time from her early age . (1)

(1) Mother : Coklat / Mau? 'Chocolate / want some?'

Child : Mau / t*wo.* 'Yes / two.'

Mother : *One /* satu aja. Giginya sakit. Ngerti? 'One / one is enough. Remember your toothache. Do you understand?'

Child : Ngerti. *Thank you*, *Ma.* 'I understand. Thank you, Mom.'

Mother : Heeh. 'Ya.'

Child : Kok 'heeh' se? *You're* 'Why did you say 'heeh? Say 'you're

> *welcome*, gitu lho.          welcome.'

Mother     : *You're welcome.*

No clear explanation concerning child's native language acquisition has been given (Clark and Clark, 1977). Can a child speak in his/her mother tongue because of the existence of "tutorial" from the people around? Can he/she speak a language because their parents "push" him/her to respond to the messages given? Can he/she speak the language because the people around him/her speak in the so-called a "baby language?" Yet, the ability of a child to learn a language is undeniable. No normal children who are exposed to the use of a certain language fail to acquire the language. In other words, all normal children successfully master the language due to the fact that language acquisition is a species uniform, specifically human specific. It does not occur in animals (Langacker, 1974).

Any normal child who is exposed to a language, whether it is his mother tongue or not, can master the language well. Even when he is exposed to two languages continuously at the same time,  he can master the two languages equally well. As an example, many children in East Java and Central Java speak Javanese and Indonesian because the two languages are used by people in the areas. The two languages are exposed to them continually. Children in  the two areas use the two languages separately or interchangeably. They may use Indonesian and/or Javanese with their parents at home, they use only Javanese with their friends outside the house, and  they use Indonesian with their teachers at schools.

To conclude, based on what has been discussed above, a language exposure is crucial to the success of language learning. On the other side of the coin, there is thus the question 'Is language acquisition possible without any exposure?'  The statement that an exposure to language is crucial can easily be investigated and proved. However, the question whether no exposure facilitates learning cannot be investigated due to laws and ethics. Laws and ethics definitely ban any attempt to place a child in an environment in which no language is spoken.

Code switching or the use of another language in a communication is a social phenomenon is commonly found in a bilingual society. The President and many educated people who can speak English perfectly or those who can only speak imperfectly often use some English expressions when speaking in Indonesian. It is this phenomenon that is used in this paper as a model of English language learning, especially the learning of speaking. This language behavior needs to be developed and socialized in order that

English language learning that is done only in the classroom and is found to be unsatisfactory can be made more effective.

**The Multi-Use of Languages**

Susanto (2004) in his study on the so-called an English-Hour Program, i.e., a program in which every teacher in the school had to use English in certain hours, noted a conversation between teachers, between a teacher and a student, and between students. In their conversation, they used English, Indonesian, and Javanese. In the program, they were allowed to do so by the program initiator realizing the imperfectness of the school members and it was for this reason that the program was launched (2, 3, 4).

(2)    Teacher 1: I'd like to see Bu
                    Endang. Is she in
                    office?
        Teacher 2: Yes, Pak.                  'Yes, Sir.'
        Teacher 1: You free now? Not
                    teaching?
        Teacher 2: No. Children has
                    sports class.
        Teacher 1: Till what time?
        Teacher 2: Uh / uh. Nine / sorry /
                    eik twenty.
        Teacher 1: Eight twenty.
        Teacher 2: Yes, eight twenty. Hek    'Yes, eight twenty. Hek / hek / hek
                    / hek / hek.              (laughing)'

(3)    Student: Bu, why absent
                    yesterday?
        Teacher: I was sick.
        Student: What / sick what?
        Teacher: No, no, no. Don't say
                    'sick what.' Say 'what
                    happened to you?'
        Student: What / what to you?

Teacher: What happened to you?

Student: What happened to you?

Teacher: I had a headache.

Student: Had it. What is 'had it?'

Teacher: Hedik / hedik /  sakit
    kepala.

Student: I have  / hedik / too,
    Madam.

Teacher Really?

(4)  Student 1: We'mu?                    'Yours?'

Student 2: Yes.

Student 1: Pinjam.                    'May I borrow it?'

Student 2: Borrow.

Student 1: Yes, borrow.

Student 2: Okay. Where your
    pencil?

Student 1: Break / break / broke.    'Break / break / broke. Broken.'
    Ceklek.

Student 2: Ha / ha / hah.            'Yes.'

A mixed use of English, Indonesian, and Javanese is actually common between the teacher and the students of the English Department (5).

(5)  Student: *Selamat pagi, Pak.*        'Good morning, Sir.'

Lecturer: Morning. Anything
    wrong?

Student: No, Sir. *Bapak jam 3 – 4*    'No, Sir. Are you supposed to teach in
    *mengajar di ruang dua*    Room 211.'
    *dua-sebelas?*

Lecturer: Room two-eleven.        'Room 211. That's right. Why?'
    That's right. Why?

Student: *Bisa tukar, Pak*. We need    'Can we study in that room? We need a

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| a bigger room. Many students in our class. | bigger room.' |
| Lecturer: *Mahasiswa saya banyak juga*. Around thirty-five. | 'I also have many students. Around 35.' |
| Student: Our class bigger, Sir. Forty-five or so. | 'Our class is bigger Sir. Forty-five or so.' |
| Lecturer: *Terus aku nek endi?* | 'Then which room should I occupy?' |
| Student: Room two-ou-eight, Sir. | 'Room 208, Sir' |
| Lecturer: That room is very *panas*. | 'The room is hot.' |
| Student: *Adhem sekarang*, Sir. | 'It's convenient now, Sir' |
| Lecturer: This time only or *sa'teruse*. | 'This time only or till the end of the semester.' |
| Student: *Seterusnya*, Sir. If you don't mind. | 'Till the end of the semester, Sir. If you don't mind.' |
| Lecturer: *Baik*. | 'Alright.' |
| Student: Thank you, Sir. *Makasih, Pak*. Good bye. | Thank you, Sir. Thank you, Sir. Good bye. |

Language choices in a conversation are affected by the formality of the situation in which the conversation takes place (Ellis and Roberts, 1987). The conversation that occurs during an examination between the examiners and the examinee is commonly held in Indonesian (6). However, soon after the examination is over and the examiner and the students are outside the examination room, the use of Indonesian and Javanese becomes common (7).

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| (6)  Examiner: Anda menyatakan bahwa pengumpulan data dalam penelitian kualitatif dapat dilakukan dengan pengamatan, wawancara, dokumen, dan angket, tapi Anda | 'You say that data collection techniques in a qualitative study are observation, interviews, documents, and questionnaires, but you didn't mention specifically which technique you actually used in your study.' |

tidak menyebutkan teknik mana yang sebenarnya Anda gunakan.

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| Examinee: Betul, Pak. | 'That's right, Sir.' |
| Examiner: Betul? Maksud saya Anda menggunakan teknik yang mana? | 'That's right? I mean which technique you actually used in your study.' |
| Examinee: Semuanya. | 'All.' |
| Examiner: Semuanya? Dalam laporan ini, Anda tidak menyebutkan itu. Benar kan? | 'All? But in your report, you don't mention it. Am I right?' |
| Examinee: Iya, Pak. | 'Yes, Sir' |

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| (7) | Examiner: *Ditakoni gitu aja ra iso.* | 'It was a simple question, but you could not answer it.' |
| | Examinee: Bingung, Pak. | 'I was confused, Sir.' |
| | Examiner: *Bingung po ra iso?* | 'Were you confused or not able to answer it?' |
| | Examinee: Bingung dan *ra iso,* Pak. | 'I was confused and I could not answer it, Sir.' |
| | Examiner: Dah dapat kuliah itu kan? *Bukune gak diwoco?* | 'Did you come to the lecture on that topic? Didn't you read the book?' |
| | Examinee: Sudah, tapi *gak ngerti. Coro Inggris, Pak.* | 'I read the book, but I didn't understand it. The book is written in English, Sir.' |

The importance of English as a means of international communication and a means for pursuing knowledge has been widely accepted. Education authorities, the management of a university, school headmasters, and those having interests in the teaching of English consistently state that English is important for students. Many things have been done to reach the goal. Among them are done by revising and designing a better curriculum, teaching and introducing the language starting from the first year of the Elementary School level. Furthermore, very young students who are still at the Kindergarten level and

even at the Play Group level have also been exposed to the language. In short, students from different levels of education are encouraged to master the language. However, ironically, teachers other than English teachers, lecturers other than English lecturers, and the school/university management are not officially required to have the same competence.

At schools English teachers work hard to teach the language and in universities English teachers are employed to do the same job. It indicates the importance of English for students. It also indicates that English are taught at schools for years. Students are required to learn the language for such a long time, but their teachers other than English teachers are not required to do the same.

As has been discussed earlier, English can only be mastered if it is used for communication. Further, English can be used in communication if the environment where the language is used is created. Again, however, many teachers other than English teachers do not make any attempt to use English—how simple it is—for communication.

Many people—those who have studied English, those who are currently learning it, and those who still plan to learn it—say they want to be able to speak in the language. However, only a few of them really do what they want to be able to do. The classical reason given is that they are afraid of making mistakes when speaking because their stock of vocabulary is limited and their grammatical mastery is poor.

Learning to speak English is identical to learn to interact in the language. As a two-way communication which involves at least two participants, the interaction may take place smoothly, stop now and then, stop here and there, or even stop completely. Good interaction may take place if the participants cooperate well and give mutual contribution. Each participant makes an attempt to contribute to the continuity and success of the interaction (8).

(8)     Participant A: *Hei, Met. Apa*        'Hi, Met. How are you?'
                      *kabar?*
       Participant B: Fine. Thank you.
                      How're you?
       Participant A: Very well. *Gimana*     'Very well. How's your wife?'
                      *kabarnya* your
                      wife?
       Participant B: She's fine. Busy

with her new-born
baby.

Participant A: A new-born baby?
Congratulation.
How many children
you have now?

Participant B: Three. *Koen?*　　　　'Three. You (How many children do you have?'

Participant A: Still  no kid at
home.

Participant B: *Kasihan lou*. But,　　'I'm sorry to hear that. But, how's your
how's you wife?　　wife?'

Participant A: Alright. She　　　　'Alright. She (has been) promoted to be /
promoted to be / to　　to be / a headmaster.'
be / *kepala sekolah.*

Participant B: Really?

Poor interaction, on the other hand, occurs when cooperation between the participants does not exist. One of the participants does not see the importance of the interaction and does not contribute anything to the continuity of the interaction. The interaction, accordingly, stops at once (9).

(9)　Participant A: Hi, Met. How're
you?

Participant B: *Koen iku omong*　　'What are you taking about? Aren't you
*opo? Waras toh*　　sick?'
*koen?*

Participant A: (Speechless)

The first and foremost step to take in order that the ability to speak English can be acquired in an environment where there are already a significant number of interested and potential learners is to follow the child's step when learning his mother tongue. At the age of two months after his birth until he reaches the age of two years, a child in his attempt to acquire his mother tongue is only to listen to the people that surround him, to use one-

word utterance, and then to use a two-word utterance before he can finally create his own "complete" utterances at the age of two or three (Clark and Clark, 1977).

Language acquisition in a child as described above can be adopted and adapted for classroom and outside classroom practices. The "silent period" in which a child cannot say anything in reaction to a given utterance can replaced with the use of Indonesian and/or Javanese. Similarly, in a situation where a language learner has difficulties in grammar and vocabulary, or when he does not know what to say, he can switch to the use of Indonesian or Javanese. In this way, communication will proceed. The ongoing conversation will not stop or does not have to be stopped (10).

(10) Speaker 1: What time the meeting begin?     'What tome does the meeting begin?'

Speaker 2: *Menurut undangan* eight o'clock.     'The invitation says at 8 o'clock.'

Speaker 1: What time now?     'What time is it now?'

Speaker 2: Eight / eight *tiga puluh*.     'Eight / eight-thirty.'

Speaker 1: *Telat.*     'It's late.'

Speaker 2: Yes, *telat.* Thirty / thirty minute.     'Yes, it's late. Thirty / thirty minutes late.'

Speaker 1: *Pak Rektor?*     'Where is *Pak Rektor*?'

Speaker 2: In office. Has tamu.     'In the office. He has a guest.'

Speaker 1: Guest?     'A guest.'

Speaker 2: Ya, guest from Jakarta.     'Yes, a guest from Jakarta.'

Speaker 1: Pak mentri?     'The minister of education?'

In a language interaction, each participant is involved socially by means of giving orders, giving directions, making appointments, asking for apologies, and many other social actions and functions. These linguistic behaviors are called speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). An addressor uses a certain speech act for a certain objective. What an addressor wants to achieve is called illocutionary force of act. What is achieved, which is given by the addressee, is called perlocutionary act. However, at times, what the addressor wants to achieve does not match what is expected to be achieved. Many factors contribute to the appearance of such misunderstanding and one of them, as shown below, is a generation gap (11).

| (11) | Father: Ada air panas? | 'Do you some hot water?' |
| | Son : Nggak ada. | 'No, I don't.' |
| | Father: Bisa panaskan air? | 'Can you boil some?' |
| | Son : Bisa? *(The son remains seated)* | 'Yes, I can.' |
| | Father: Maksudku, tolong buatkan Papa kopi. | 'I mean 'Can you make me some coffee?' |
| | Son : Ooh, maaf. Nggak jelas sih. | 'Oh, sorry. You're not clear, my dear father.' |

Misunderstanding or misinterpretation occurs when the addressor's meaning as a whole is understood differently by the addressor. As shown in Dialog 10, the meaning of an utterance does not depend on how the utterance is constructed (the grammar) nor the words that form it (the vocabulary), but rather what it is intended to mean. As commonly known, a child understands a mother's utterance and a mother understands a child's utterance, because both of them focus on meaning, not on the grammar nor the vocabulary. Between the age of 1 to 4 years, a child and the people around him communicate about their environment by using single-word utterances and/or two-word utterances and can acquire grammatical competence unconsciously. It implies that learning a language does not necessarily start from learning the grammar.

Misunderstanding or misinterpretation in a conversation, whether it is spoken in one language (Indonesian only) (11) or in two languages (Indonesian and Javanese) (12) is common. The problem arises from the meaning of the utterance, not from the grammar nor from the vocabulary used.

| (12) | Speaker 1: Pak Amin ada? | 'Is Mr. Amin at home?' |
| | Speaker 2: *Nopo*? | 'Sorry.' |
| | Speaker 1: Pak Amin ada? Pak Amin enten? | 'Is Mr. Amin at home? Is Mr. Amin at home?' |
| | Speaker 2: Enten. *(For some time there is only the sound of someone's breathing. There is no* | 'Yes, he is |

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|  | *sound of somebody* |  |
|  | *calling Mr. Amin.)* |  |
| Speaker 1: | Pak Amin teng nggriyo? | 'Is Pak Amin at home?' |
| Speaker 2: | Nggih. *(No reaction, except the sound of somebody's breathing.)* | 'Yes, he is.' |
| Speaker 1: | Kulo jeng ngomong. Saged? | 'I'd like to talk to him. May I?' |
| Speaker 2: | Oooh / nggih. | 'Oh / certainly.' |

Misunderstanding or misinterpretation is common in a conversation, but generally the communication proceeds because both the addressor and the addressee use the so-called *negotiation of meaning.* Studies on an interaction between a native English speaker and immigrants from Vietnam living in America indicate the existence of seven interactional features being used: confirmation check, clarification request, completion, syntactic correction, semantic correction, code switching, and elicitation (Long, 1987; Pica and Doughty, 1985). Susanto (1994) found two more interactional features used by the conversation participants in a classroom setting, i.e., pedagogical-confirmation check and pedagogical-clarification request.

**Conclusion**

To end the discussion, the following conclusions can now be drawn:

1. Learning to speak English is learning to use the language by involving oneself in a day-to-day conversation;

2. To accommodate non-fluent speakers, the conversation created is not necessarily an only-English conversation, but rather a multi-language conversation in which the conversation participants can use the language(s) they know well—the participants can use Indonesian, Javanese, and/or other languages beside English;

3. Each conversation participant must focus on meaning, forgetting any fear in making grammatical mistakes and/or pronunciation;

4. Each participant must cooperate well in an attempt to avoid the on-going conversation to stop by means of negotiation of meaning.

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