

# QUESTIONING FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN ISLAMIC PRE-SCHOOL

*Rohmani Nur Indah*

---

rohmani\_indah@yahoo.com

Fakultas Humaniora dan Budaya Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang  
Jalan Gajayana 50 Malang, Telp/Fax (0341) 570872

---

## Abstract

This paper questions the urgency of foreign language learning at early age by covering some arguments on the acquisition and bilingualism. Nowadays in Indonesia, under the interest of education, bilingual learning is undertaken by adopting the theory of bilingual acquisition referring to Chomsky's ideas. In fact, the foreign language learning is not always in line with the principle of language acquisition especially for the early age children. The globalization era requires foreign language mastery so that for many institutions of children education have got the bilingual learning. As the example, some of Islamic educational institutions at the level of playgroup have applied the instruction in English and teaching Arabic words, by considering that the earlier foreign language learning is the better, and the fact that the golden age of brain development occurs at the first five years. This needs to be analyzed further, because there is also important task to have mother tongue language acquisition. For the community of multilingual such as in Indonesia, the acquisition of many languages is unavoidable. Therefore, parents are faced with two choices: To prior the mother tongue and bahasa Indonesia as second language or encourage the bilingual learning of Arabic and English.

## Keywords

Acquisition, Learning, Bilingual

## Introduction

Language acquisition begins very early in the human lifespan, and begins, logically enough, with the acquisition of a language's sound pattern. The topic of language acquisition implicates the most profound questions about our understanding of the human mind, and its subject matter, the speech of children, is endlessly fascinating. As stated by Pinker, languages are complex combinations of elegant principles which children acquire within their capability namely cognition. This brings the ability to express themselves verbally (Clark & Clark, 1977: 245)

Language acquisition is an everyday and yet magical feat of childhood. Within three or five years, virtually all children become fully competent in at least one language. This is normal and it will be more remarkable when those children simultaneously acquire proficiency in two or more languages during the preschool years. In the following discussion, the importance of each acquisition, first or second language opposed with the language learning will

be elaborated. Further, it will answer the question whether bilingual acquisition and learning are similar and fruitful or not.

## Review on first language acquisition

Still today, it is commonly held belief that children acquire their mother tongue or their first language through imitation of the parents, caregivers or the people in their environment. Linguists too had the same conviction until 1957, when Noam Chomsky propounded his theory that the capacity to acquire language is fact innate as human has Language Acquisition Device. Therefore, children could possibly acquire language though with so little experience of life (Field, 2003: 17)

Chomsky's innate hypothesis is based on the observation that all children regardless of IQ level can acquire language effortlessly and in a relatively short period of time. They do not have to be taught formally to acquire language and they can discover the system of language from a small unsystematic amount of data. In his concept, Chomsky believes that exposure is all

that is necessary for a child to learn a language. Linguists who belong to interactionists argue that it is insufficient, but that together with social interaction is possible. A child isolated with a television set until puberty could not possibly internalize all that children normally infer from the language in their environment, without contact and social interaction with other human beings. This belief is then adopted by the Islamic pre-schools which offer exposure on foreign language to make children communicate in English or Arabic. Whether the quality of the exposure is good or not does not belong to their consideration. In this case, they mix between the theories of first language acquisition with the teaching of foreign language. Indeed, acquisition and learning are two different topics.

Yet, by having exposure in mother language, children can acquire their language optimally. It does not mean that their mother language can be easily substituted by foreign language because their acquisition is mainly influenced by their environment.

### **Second language acquisition and learning**

Second language acquisition refers to the case in which a learner who has some degree of control over one language system is introduced to a second (or third or fourth). A child's second language can be fully acquired with or without formal teaching and learning process. For an Indonesian child, the mother tongue is not always Bahasa Indonesia. When the acquisition of mother tongue precedes the learning of Bahasa Indonesia, it is called second language acquisition. Bahasa Indonesia taught at school is then labeled as second language learning.

Everyone who intends to learn second language knows that it is not as learning to his native language. It needs some instruction, dictionary, grammar, etc. The younger ones are easier to learn the second language than the older ones. The critical age discussed earlier has explained between a child's ease in learning a first language and the difficulty in learning second language after puberty (Fromkin, et al 2001: 48).

Today, bilingual teaching has been adopted in some Islamic pre-school by introducing English and Arabic language as early as possible. The theory underlying bilingual teaching is adopted from second language acquisition. This case is basically only appropriate if applied in English speaking countries. Such misunderstanding begins from mixed concept between language acquisition and language learning.

The difference between language acquisition and language learning has been recently articulated as the fundamental difference hypothesis. It goes without saying that naturally children acquire their first language, and when the learning of another language is done in formal classroom interaction, it does not belong to acquisition anymore. This is in line with Krashen (1981: 46) who has proposed that there is a distinction between acquisition and learning. Acquisition is the process by which children unconsciously acquire their native language, while learning is conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them and being able to talk about them.

### **Foreign language learning for children**

English has become the first foreign language taught in Indonesia. In Islamic schools, it goes together with Arabic language to facilitate the learning of Islamic references. Researches on factors affecting learners' success in both foreign languages have been carried out. One of the factors argued is the optimum age to start the learning. Some of the researchers favor adult learners and in contrast some show that child learners are superior. The later seems to be more logical since the tenet of "the younger the better". Yet, some other researchers claim that age is not significantly correlated with the acquisition success. They, further, claim that this process deals with its mechanism regardless age-related differences. A tenuous finding still in questions as many research finding based on empirical study still cannot generalize accurate relationship between age and language acquisition success (Indah, 1999)

Up to now, definite answers for differential success among foreign language learners, including the explanation on age factor are not adequate. The children's mastery of second or foreign language is influenced by the mastery of their first language (Snow in Gleason and Ratner, 1998).

The above resulted in conclusion that children without fully mastering first language will encounter more difficulties in learning foreign language. Yet, whether the earlier learning of the foreign language is the better still needs further consideration.

Age is related to some language learning factors namely language aptitude, learning strategy, personality and cognitive style (Indah, 1999).

As mentioned by Carroll (in Freeman, 1991), language aptitude consists of four abilities to

measure. They are phonetic coding, grammatical sensitivity, rote learning and inductive learning. These kinds of ability develop altogether with age

Age is also linked with learning strategies. The more mature the learner, the more enhancing his learning strategies will be. The strategies refer to the way the learner compensates a breakdown in language vocabulary in communication, for example by paraphrasing, changing diction, using gesture, explaining around the word and so on.

The connection between age and personality can be viewed from the bias on learners' affective filter. Whether the learner's personality is introvert or extrovert, the optimum use of affective filter modifies their language learning. The affective filter covers learners' emotional state, motivation, individual anxiety, and peer identification. This filter will evolve simultaneously with the maturing of age.

Cognitive style is also connected with age. The argument appears on the basis that child and adult who learn foreign language might involve in different processes. The former utilizes Language Acquisition Device and the later employs general problem solving abilities.

Having scrutinized the link between age and some aspects above, tracing the source of age related differences in foreign language learning success is needed. Some possible sources of them are: (1) biological factors which covers the development of cerebral dominance, (2) cognitive development stage referring to Piaget's formal operation process, (3) filter which assumes that adults are more conscious in learning language than children, and (4) differences in the language environment meaning that adult and children are differ in language receiving (Indah, 1999)

There are at least four major causes have been suggested to explain such differences: (1) social-psychological explanation, (2) cognitive explanation, (3) input explanation, and (4) neurological explanation.

The explanation of social-psychology is based on the argument that adults differ from children in that, for example, they might be more inhibited or that they might establish their identity of speaker of a certain first language. In other words, adults have mastered their first language firmly as they speak with an accent that they proud of. In addition, adults are often afraid to make mistakes during the process of learning English or Arabic as foreign language.

From the dimension of cognition, Krashen (1982) have implicated cognitive development, particularly as attainment of Piaget's formal operation stage, is negatively affecting second language acquisition. Piaget's formal operation stage involves the ability to think abstractly.

Another possible cause is the input explanation, which comprises the feature of input. Children receive simple input since they are unable to think abstractly. As they speak here and now input, language addressed to them should be arranged in such way to ease their comprehension and closer to the language basic structure (Hatch, 1978).

Regarding the neurological explanation, Lenneberg present evidence to show that the two hemisphere of human brain become specialized for different functions around puberty, this is known as lateralization. Before puberty the brain is still flexible in transferring the function of the two brain sides whenever it get injured (in Ellis, 1987).

The success of language learning cannot be separated from linguistic environment, which consists of formal and informal language environment. Krashen (1981) assumes that formal linguistic environment such as classroom setting characterized by presentation of language rule and teacher's feedback is significantly efficient in increasing foreign language proficiency in adults. The informal linguistic environment, which is available outside classroom setting, may increase motivation to study. The informal linguistic environment focuses on content of utterance, which results in learner's fluency with spontaneous performance. On the other hand, the formal linguistic environment emphasizes on learner's learned rule in order to make them concern about accuracy of language form.

Indonesian linguists have different opinion toward the best age to start English learning. Those who believe that the younger learner will learn language better, state that it should be given in elementary school or in pre-school education. Whereas, those who believe that English teaching applied recently is well fixed, considering that English learning since high school is still befitting. This is on the basis that adolescent or adult learner can learn language faster than children do.

The suggested way to introduce foreign language learning for child learners is to use oral approach and the language choice should offer best opportunity for children to use functionally in

out-of-school environment. In addition, it has to be comprehensive and continuous (Burns and Lowe in Fauziati, 1994). Therefore, the foreign language learning will not warrant the learners' success without comprehensive and continuous linguistic environment formally and informally although it has been introduced earlier during childhood.

Another view of foreign language is that students in their early teens are quicker and more effective learners than for example 7 year-old learners. It may be, of course, that the acquisition of it requires a combination of factors. Some language practitioners believe that the optimum age may be during the years 11-16 when the flexibility of the language acquisition has not been completely lost and the maturation of cognitive skills allows a more effective 'working out' of the features of the language encountered. Thus, the teenagers are typically much more self-conscious than young children.

Nevertheless, in such learning errors might happen, which is not something hindering a learner's progress but is probably a due to achieve learning progress being made as s/he tries out strategies of communication in the new language.

Some errors may be due to the interference of expression of structure from the first language. Some of the errors, however, seem to have no connection to the form of either first or second language. This refers to the term interlanguage. For example when saying *My body is not delicious* (which means I am not well) or *We meet different river* (meaning We meet some other time)

Whereas foreign language teachers cringe at student's error, child language researchers believe that errors are sign of progress, learning involves reorganizing knowledge not just storing it, and language acquisition is a development process. This different view of language learning caused a minor revolution in foreign language teaching and in the kind of research done in second language learning (Snow in Gleason and Ratner, 1998).

The learned system is the product of formal instruction and comprises a conscious process, which results in conscious knowledge about the language. When the teacher talk meets the requirements for comprehensible input and perhaps with student participation in the classroom, this can be called as an environment suitable for language acquisition. According to Snow, this refers to immersion setting in which the learners taught through the medium of the

targeted language. Whereas, when the formal learning does not contribute to meaningful interaction, which may be done in tedious drill, the linguistic environment enabling acquisition is failed (in Gleason and Ratner, 1998).

### **Myth and fact on the success of foreign language learning**

Many people believe in the myth that the success of foreign language learning is mainly influenced by age, it means that children have more advantage over adult in foreign language learning. Those who send their children to learn foreign language in pre-school belong to this group. The following is the description comparing between the belief and what fact says.

The first myth says children can pronounce foreign language perfectly. The fact shows that there can be acquisition barriers related to foreign language learning for instance to pronounce foreign language correctly both for children and adult. Some less likely reasons include the suggestion that adults' tongue get stiff from pronouncing one type of language (e.g. Javanese) and just cannot cope with the new sounds of another language (e.g. English or Arabic). It is a common idea, but there is no physical evidence to support it.

The second myth says that adult cannot reach native like proficiency just like children who are learning foreign language. However, the fact shows that even in ideal learning situations, adults seem to reach native like proficiency in using foreign language. There are individuals who can achieve a great expertise in writing, but not in speaking. Some features (e.g. vocabulary and grammar) of a foreign language are easier to acquire than other (e.g. phonology)

Current researches on language acquisition and learning try to seek the practical answer of whether there is an optimal age for starting foreign language learning. Foreign language teachers typically encounter adolescent and adult learners because the learners' native bilingual acquisition takes place during their childhood. The third myth says children learners are better than adult ones. However, the fact shows that evaluation of programs with preadolescent foreign language students (for example the English teaching in Elementary School) reveals that younger children considerably slower than high school aged children or adults at learning languages through formal teaching.

The fourth myth says that adult learners cannot acquire foreign language as fast as children. In

this case, the fact proves that as child language researchers have pointed out that, contrary to what generally believed, older learners also acquire second language faster than younger ones in untutored settings. However, older learners also are more likely to encounter fossilization and persistent accents (Krashen et.al, 1988), so their ultimate attainment may be lower.

Based on the comparison between the myth and the fact above, it can be concluded that both children and adult learners have the same opportunity to reach success in foreign language learning. Linguists are inclined to believe in the critical period hypothesis, which states that normal language acquisition must occur in early childhood. Neither the psycholinguists nor those taking sociocultural approaches to second language acquisition take much interest in the issue of an optimal age for learning; they see the process as gradual and incremental at all stages. (Snow in Gleason and Ratner , 1998)

### Conclusion

There are many distinctions between the processes of learning and acquisition. For instance the terms are generally used to separate between bilingual acquisition and bilingual learning. In addition, implied within this distinction is the gap between children of 0-5 years learning their mother tongue and second language and those who may begin at this stage

learning bilingual foreign language. The process is a conscious one in learning whereas it is subconscious in acquisition. In language acquisition, the focus is on communication or reception of a message as opposed to syntax and grammar as in the case of language learning.

Moreover, the context is usually crucial and meaningful in language acquisition, but need not be important to the same extent in language learning. Motivation, too, is a factor, which may broaden the gulf between learning and acquisition, as for the latter the language is a matter of urgent necessity. Most importantly, however, the usual overcome of language acquisition is fluency which is by no means guaranteed in language learning.

Learning foreign languages for some language practitioners should be started earlier inclined by the critical age hypothesis. This tenet is not emphasized by psycholinguists or sociolinguists as they see the process as gradual and incremental at all stages.

Parents in bilingual family, then, are faced to two choices for their children: to prioritize the adequacy of native bilingual acquisition or to start the learning of bilingual foreign languages – which in Islamic schools today are Arabic and English.

### REFERENCES

- Adamson, B.L. 1996. *Communication Development during Infancy*. Oxford: Westview.
- Clark, Herbert H & Clark, Eve V. 1977. *Psychology and Language*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers.
- Ellis, R. 1987. *Second Language Acquisition in Context*. Toronto: Prentice-Hall.
- Field, J. 2003. *Psycholinguistics: A Resource Book for Students*. New York: Routledge.
- Fauziati, E. 1994. "Selayang Pandang Pengajaran Bahasa Asing di Sekolah Dasar". Unpublished paper presented on *Discussion of Research Center*. Surakarta: UMS, August.
- Fromkin, V., Blair, D., and Collins, P. 2001. *An Introduction to Language*. Victoria: Thomson
- Genesee, F. 1994. *Educating Second Language Children*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Gleason, J.B., and Ratner, N.B. 1998. *Psycholinguistics*. Victoria: Wadsworth Thomson Learning
- Hatch, E.M. 1978. *Second Language Acquisition: A book of Readings*. Massachusetts: Newbury House
- Indah, R.N. 1999. "Age-Related Differences in Questions" Unpublished Paper presented in *Seminar on English Language Education*. Malang: The State University of Malang, December.



----- . 2001. *"Teknologi dalam Pembelajaran Bahasa"*. Unpublished paper presented in *Short Course on English Language Teaching*. Malang; English Language Department of STAIN. July.

Krashen, S.D. 1981. *Second Language Acqusition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press

Krashen, S.D. and Terrel, T.D. 1988. *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisitioon in The Classroom*. Singapore: Prentice-Hall