

Syntactic Awareness of Early Childhood aged 5-6: A Case of Sentence Structure

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to examine syntactic awareness of children aged 5-6 in Indonesian context. The aims of the study is to investigate early childhood in identifying and correcting active and passive sentences and then describing the characteristics of high and low performing students. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. The data were collected in three ways: 1) Assesment tests, 2) Questionnaire, and 3) Interview. The analysis reveals that the children could identify and correct active sentences (76.69%) and passive sentences (67.16%). In describing the quantitative analysis, this study focuses on the high and low performing students in revealing the characteristics of the data. This study suggests that children have their capacity to engage in learning linguistic. Therefore, the result of this study could be considered to be the cases for further literacy learning. Based on the social aspects, there are 3 main social aspects that characterize high and low performing students; parents' education background, children activity, and the quantity of child-directed speech.

Keywords: *Syntactic Awareness, Active and Passive Sentence, Kindergarten Study*

INTRODUCTION

The period in which children start to enter their first formal school (kindergarten) is interesting to be investigated. Theoretically, by age five, children essentially master the sound and grammar system of their language and acquire thousands of words (Hoff, 2009). Therefore, the first five years of life are critically important for the development of language.

In previous studies Davidson, Rasche and Pervez (2010) studies investigating children's syntactic awareness aged 3-5. The study shows that bilingual children aged 3 and 4 were better at detecting grammatically incorrect sentences than their monolingual peers. Then, Another study by Plaza (2001) examined two metalinguistic skills; syntactic awareness and phonological awareness. Then a study related syntactic awareness and phonology has been conducted by Plaza (2001). The result showed that kindergarten children who exhibited early syntactic skills and syllable processing made

particularly significant progress in consonant identification after one year of reading instruction. Indonesia is one of the countries in which the children is under attention (UNESCO, 2016)

As a way to identify children literature development, some relevant studies have been conducted in Indonesia. The finding only includes measurement of children's syntactic awareness. For example, Impuni (2012) measured syntactic awareness to children aged 5 by retelling stories. She found that the children produced different complex and compound sentences. Meanwhile, Komara (2016) focused on syntactic structures in Indonesian active sentences (intransitive, transitive, ditransitive, and semi-transitive) through audiovisual. He found that the students acquired high results all over and revealed that there was no difference between the visual identification and audio correction. Further research in Indonesian syntactic awareness needs to be investigated as references for further researchers.

To add the existing number of studies in children's syntactic awareness in Indonesia, this study investigates children in identifying and correcting active and passive sentences in Indonesian context. This study only focus on children aged 5-6 at two Kindergartens; *Calistung* Kindergarten and *Non-Calistung* Kindergarten. Thus, besides investigating children in identification and correction skills, this study also attempts to find out social aspects that contribute to the children's performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Syntax in General

The term 'syntax' is from Ancient Greek *syntaxis*, which literally means 'arrangement' or 'setting out together' (Matthews, 1982 cited in Valen, 2001, p. 1). Syntax has been defined by some experts; for instance, Chomsky says that syntax is the study of the principles and processes by which sentences are constructed in particular languages (Chomsky, 2002).

Syntax has been developed by Noam Chomsky in the mid-1950s who

described generative grammar. Generative grammar is that sentences are generated by subconscious set of procedures (like computer program) (Carnie, 2006, p. 6). These procedures are a set of grammatical rules, which are taught to generate the sentence of a language. Carnie (2006) states that these rules are like the command line that puts together words into a sentence. The same definition has been stated by Aarts (2013), claiming that syntax is part of grammar that concerns with structures of sentence. More simply, *syntax* can be defined as the arrangement of words in a sentence. These definitions of syntax are implied from what is regarded as the largest unit of syntactic description, the sentence, while the smaller unit than the sentence preferred to clauses, phrases, words, and morphemes (Wekker & Haegeman, 1996, p. 5).

Syntactic Awareness

Syntactic awareness is a part of metalinguistic skills and deals with the awareness of sentence structure. Cain

(2007) mentions that syntactic awareness concerns with the ability to consider the structure rather than the meanings of the sentence. Then, Tunmer (1987) adds that syntactic awareness develops the child's ability to reflect upon and to manipulate aspects of the internal grammatical structure sentences. Therefore, syntactic awareness may be the most promising candidate as an additional measure of metalinguistic awareness and more research on this measure is needed (McGuinness, 2005; Roth et al., 1996).

Syntactic awareness refers to the child's ability to notice the internal grammatical structure of sentences (Genc, 2013). It measures children's ability in identifying correct and incorrect grammatical constructions. On syntactic awareness study, the children would hear a sentence that consist a 'mistake' so that they sounded 'wrong' and were asked to fix the sentence. Apel and Brimo (2007) expresses similar opinion that syntactic awareness is measured by conducting two tasks: (a) a grammatical correction

task, (b) a word-order correction task. Davidson (2010) adds that the parameters of syntactic awareness are assessed through two paradigms, which are identification and correction. An identification paradigm is used to identify correct grammar while a correction paradigm is used by correcting ungrammatical sentences.

Performance on measures of syntactic awareness improves by age and is related to reading ability. As mentioned by Cain (2007) on his research, syntactic awareness has been hypothesized to relate specifically to both word reading and reading comprehension. He found that the relation between syntactic awareness and reading comprehension is indirect and arises from the variance shared with vocabulary, grammatical knowledge and memory. Meanwhile, another research by Thorndike (1973) in Mokhtari (2013) claims that the number of words children can read and understand begins to positively influence their ability to comprehend what they read. To sum up, syntactic awareness is the conscious ability to

manipulate or judge word-order within the context of a sentence based on the application of grammatical rules.

Syntactic Acquisition

Syntactic acquisition is the area of child language acquisition that has been most studied from the perspective of linguistic theory (Stromswold, 1997). Since syntactic acquisition is a part of language acquisition, it discusses how children acquire language, specifically on how children acquire the rudiment of syntax. Since syntactic structure spells out the relationships between words in a sentence, it makes sense to assume that children need to have access to words and their meanings in order to learn about syntax. Conversely, Gleitman (1990) in Christophe (2008) mentions that learning about the meaning of words will be greatly facilitated if children have access to some aspects of a syntactic structure. This can partially be solved if children can learn some aspects of the structure of their language through an analysis of the speech that they are exposed to.

Syntactic acquisition is determined when children have access to the grammatical principles found in adult grammar (Ingram & Thompson, 1996). Ingram and Thompson (1996) continue that, most generally, there are two points of view; lean of interpretations which argue that child's grammars are missing and rich of interpretation which argues that the child and adult have access to the same syntactic principles.

Syntactic Acquisition and Syntactic Awareness

Syntactic acquisition and syntactic awareness are two terms that have different meaning. To avoid misunderstanding, an explanation to distinguish between the acquisition of syntax and syntactic awareness needs to be made.

The acquisition of syntactic knowledge is a relative newcomer to linguistic inquiry, becoming of serious interest to linguists in the 1960s (Thornton, 2013). The acquisition of syntax has been most frequently used by Chomsky in establishing arguments

for the position that linguistic constructs are innate (Stromswold, 1997). Chomskyan view says that children are born with an innate Universal Grammar, termed the “generative” viewpoint. Therefore, before the infant gets the acquisition of syntax, they first understand a word. From that word, the infant can gradually understand a sentence.

The acquisition of syntax has been described by Christophe (2008). He finds that infants could bootstrap their lexical and syntactic acquisition by paying attention to two specific sources of information that can be available early on, without much knowledge of their native language: phrasal prosody and function words. Infants may have acquired the syntax acquisition, but before that, they understand the word first. Therefore, the acquisition of syntax may be assumed that it happens unconsciously. Syntactic acquisition occurs unconsciously since the knowledge about syntax is used by human in spontaneous speech.

Significance of Syntactic Awareness

Considering the significance of syntactic awareness, there are many studies focusing on the contribution of this awareness, especially towards reading skill (see Nation & Snowling 2000; Plaza & Cohen, 2003; Martohardjono *et al.*, 2005; Guo, Rohrig & Williams, 2011; and Brimo, 2011).

In terms of syntactic awareness and reading ability, Nation & Snowling (2000) assessed children with good and poor reading skill. The study was performed in children aged six to eleven. The result demonstrates that children with poor reading did less well in the task and developmentally they were delayed in syntactic awareness. However, in a long and complex sentence task, both poor and good readers performed less well. This means that children still found difficulty in solving complex sentence.

Another research also supports the idea of syntactic awareness as reading comprehension. Mokhtari & Thompson (2006) also sought to find out whether the student’s syntactic

awareness is influenced by reading ability. About thirty-two fifth grade students were assessed with TOLD (Test of Language Development). The result shows that poor comprehenders had difficulty in syntactic awareness. Along with reading development, it is also believed that syntactic awareness is correlated to vocabulary acquisition. Guo, Rohrig & Williams (2011) mention that syntactic awareness increases vocabulary knowledge, which will in turn facilitate reading comprehension (p. 165).

To sum up, syntactic awareness contributes to the development of literacy skill, especially vocabulary knowledge and reading development. As mentioned by Cain (2007), syntactic awareness contributes to reading comprehension and is mediated by vocabulary. Therefore, recent studies have revealed that syntactic awareness is important to improve the comprehension of reading.

Active and Passive Sentence in Indonesian

Active and passive voice constructions are interchangeably used in academic and non-academic writing for different purposes; for example passive voice constructions are used to execute special discourse functions due to its marked voice such as creating distance between writer and the text mostly found in scientific paper (Baratta, 2009 cited in Yannuar, Shitadevi, Basthomi, & Widiati, 2014, p. 1400).

Indonesian passive construction is more difficult than the active ones (Markus, 2002). Indonesian culture tends to talk about things and people around, rather than talking about what we do ourselves (Markus, 2002, p. 33). Therefore, the object is considered to be more important than the agent itself. In Indonesian, passive constructions are mainly used with transitive verbs such as *beli*, *baca*, and *tulis* (Buy, read, and write). Markus (2002) mentions there are two basic forms of passive construction in Indonesia. The first one is formed by using the prefix *di*, while the active ones using prefix *me*. The second one uses the *doer-root* and the

doer-kan, which are the most difficult ones. English passive construction is also harder than the active ones.

Sugono (2009, cited in Apriliani, 2014, p. 26) mentions the first type of Indonesian passive construction. He mentions that transitive active sentence can be changed into the passive ones. The object is changed to be the subject; so that the prefix *me*-root is changed into *di*-root. In the second type, the predicate in the passive sentence does not have prefix *di* or prefix *me*. Verbs that fill the predicate are obtained by removing the prefix *me* (n) from its active verb. To replace the prefix *di*-, the passive verb employs the noun doer on the original sentence (passive sentence). The example is as follows: *Lamaran telah kukirim ke kantor*, while the active form is *Saya telah mengirimkan lamaran ke kantor*.

Teaching Reading and Writing in Early Childhood

Early literacy skill may have a clear and consistently relationship with conventional literacy skills, such as

reading and writing (Zygouris-Coe & Center, 2001). According to Zygouris-Coe and Center (2001) study stated that when children read extensively, they become better writers. Whenever the children read variety of genres, it helps the children learn the structures and language that transfer to their writing. Therefore, some of current preschools' teacher apply teaching reading and writing in the class.

In Indonesia, most of kindergarten teachers applied reading and writing in the class. The learning process of teaching reading and writing is not in a formal way like an elementary school (Iswara, Latifah, & Budiati 2013). However, some people deny learning to read and write for early childhood. As it appears in some online newspapers that learning to read and write is not intended for young children. One of the online articles from compass newspaper (2013) mentions that early childhood has not been prepared mentally to read and write.

To sum up, Through Reading and writing, students will gain a better

understanding of material and will have a greater ability to demonstrate that understanding.

Characteristic of High Performing Students and Low Performing Students

There are several topic areas that are most commonly linked to academic performance including students' performance. Students' performance may be caused by several social aspects. The social aspects of high performing students and low performing students are commonly discussed in several points, such as socioeconomic status (SES), Home literacy environment, and linguistic background.

In Socioeconomic Status (SES), the topic is usually determined by combining Parents' educational level, occupational prestige, and income (Jeynes, 2002 as cited in Barry, 2005, p. 7). Research has found that socioeconomic status is an important family factor (Majorbanks, 1996 as cited in Barry, 2005). This study also explores further that the causes of negative SES for students are created

by family conflict and stress that affect children's performance (Barry, 2005). Meanwhile, due to the stable economy in high SES students, SES parents monitor their children more often. Moreover, high SES parents are able to describe their children's best and worst subjects as well as their teachers and coaches (Evans, 2004, p. 81).

A study of preschool students by Tarrelli and Stubbe (2010) mentions that preschool children who have enjoyed various home literacy environments have already experienced literacy from an early age than those children who were not doing any home literacy environment. Home literacy environment is a term used to describe the literacy-related interactions, resources, and attitudes that children experience at home (Hamilton, Hayiou – Thomas, Hulme, & Snowling, 2016, p. 401). Tarrelli and Stubbe (2010) add that home literacy environment may affect linguistic background. Hamilton et al (2016), mentions that reading activity may help children to develop their vocabulary, then if the parents read

with their children regularly, children's sensitivity to linguistic competence will increase.. Therefore, home literacy environment may affect children's linguistic background.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a quantitative descriptive in collecting and analyzing the data. As Cresswell (2003) mentions that a quantitative approach employs strategies of inquiry such as experiments and surveys, and collects data on instruments that yield statistical data. Meanwhile, descriptive method helps the writer to provide description of reality as objective as possible (Lans and Van der Voordt, 2002). Additionally, William (2007, as cited in Nurdiansyah, 2016) mentions that descriptive approach is also aimed to identify the relation between attributes and variables on the phenomenon in question without manipulating the samples.

The present study was conducted at two kindergartens located in Bandung. The total numbers of students were forty-two students. The

two Kindergartens were selected based on activities that are implemented by the teachers in the classroom. The teachers at Kindergarten A do not teach the students how to read and write (Non-Calistung). Meanwhile, the teachers at Kindergarten B teach the students how to read, write and even count numbers (Calistung). The data were collected using instrument to meet the purpose of the study. In this study, there were three ways of collecting the data: The assessment test of syntactic awareness, the parents' questionnaire, and the parents' interview.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The present study reveals that children aged 5-6 are able to perform syntactic awareness tests very well. Therefore, they have developed syntactic awareness especially in word order changes. The analysis of the study shows that more than a half item tests are answered correctly by the students (71.92%). Tsang and Stokes (2011) propound that five year old children are better in syntactic awareness than

another categories of metalinguistic awareness. There are several points that will be discussed in this subchapter: two assessments in each active and passive sentence tasks (identification and correction), the overall active-passive sentence tasks, the comparison of two schools, and social aspects that characterize high performing students and low performing students.

First, on identification and correction test, 76.69% of the students were able to identify both active and passive sentences. Meanwhile, only 67.16% of the students were able to correct the wrong sentences (in both active and passive forms). In this Second, in the present study, the result found that the active sentence tests are easier than passive ones. In active and passive sentence tests, the result shows that the students successfully answered 76.69% test items on active sentence tests, while in passive sentence; the students could answer 67.16% test items. Then, the finding on Calistung kindergarten and *Non - Calistung* kindergarten reveal an interesting

result. According to the final data, about 70.24% of the students in *Non Calistung* kindergarten answered all the tests correctly, while 73.61% of the students could answered all the tests correctly in *Non-Calistung* kindergarten. The result shows that *Non - Calistung* kindergarten obtained higher result than *Calistung* kindergarten.

Meanwhile, to describe the students, this study investigates several social characteristics, such as socioeconomic status (SES), home literacy environment, and linguistic background. Then, the social characteristic focuses in high performing students and low performing students. Of the several social aspects sought, there were 3 main social aspects that characterize the students with the highest and lowest score: Parents' education background, children activity, and the quantity of child-directed speech. The result of this study could be considered to be the cases for further literacy learning.

CONCLUSION

Two main principles in syntactic abilities are identification and correction. Thus, the use of these principles shows children's syntactic awareness that is discussed in this study. The aim of this study is to explore syntactic awareness of Kindergarten students in Indonesian context. Specifically, this study investigates the students' identification and correction skills. Furthermore, this study also aims to investigating social aspects in children's performance. To see the syntactic awareness, students are given two tests related to Indonesian syntactic awareness. Then, in order to answer the second question, the data is obtained by distributing the questionnaire and conducting an interview with the parents.

There are two points that can be drawn from the present study to answer the research questions. Firstly, syntactic awareness in children aged 5-6 has emerged. Most of the students could identify the wrong sentences very well. However, a few students found difficult in correcting jumbled

sentences. About 76.69% of the students correctly identify all the sentences; meanwhile only 67.16% of the students could arrange the wrong sentences to good ones. Surprisingly, the finding on Calistung kindergarten and *Non Calistung* kindergarten reveal interesting result. According to the final data, about 70.24% of the students in *Non Calistung* kindergarten answered all the tasks correctly, while 73.61% of the students could answered all the tasks correctly in *Non-Calistung* kindergarten. The result shows that *Non - Calistung* kindergarten obtained higher result than *Calistung* kindergarten. This means that teaching reading and writing at school may not affect students' syntactic awareness. Lastly, there are three characteristics of social aspects emerged in high performing students and low performing students: parents' education background, children activity, and the quantity of child-directed speech.

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