

**TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR AT UNIVERSITY:**  
A Pedagogical and Psychological Reflection Based on an Experimental Research at FKIP  
Universitas Bung Hatta

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**Abstract**

*Grammar is one of important aspects of a language that makes the language learnable and teachable. The teaching of grammar, especially foreign language grammar, needs a serious attention from the teachers and related institutions. Specifically in universities, the teaching of English grammar should provide the students with theoretical concepts of the English grammar and opportunity to use the concepts in their communication. The grammar teaching should also offers suitable assignments by which they may test their language hypothesis. To establish and develop the students' knowledge about the English grammar, the use of students' mother tongue as an instructional language in the classroom was considered effective. However, an experimental research conducted by Refnita (2006) showed that the use of Bahasa Indonesia as an instructional language of Grammar I subject was not more effective than the use of English. It is true that bahasa Indonesia is not the students' mother tongues, but they have mastered it as almost perfectly as their mother tongues. That's why in her research bahasa Indonesia was considered similar with the students' mother tongues.*

*The rejection of the proposed research hypothesis implied that pedagogical and psychological factors should be taken into account in the teaching-learning process because the success of learning English grammar does not solely depend upon the instructional language. Further analysis of the research result reflected that the students' motivation and learning readiness even more determined the success of learning Grammar I. In relation with this phenomenon, the present article, which is based on and developed from the research result, will discuss further the pedagogical and psychological reflections of grammar teaching that need to be considered in the teaching-learning process of English grammar at universities in addition to the use of instructional language.*

**Key words/ phrases:** *mother tongue, instructional language, English grammar, motivation, learning readiness, pedagogical & psychological factors*

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, language teaching was influenced by the traditional linguistics which mostly focused on the grammar (form) of language. Modern development of language teaching theories and approaches then come to the argumentation that language teaching is both the grammar (form) and the use of language. It is logical and reasonable because no grammar without use, and no use without grammar in language. Language teaching should accommodate that (human) language consists of form, meaning, and function. Simply, language form refers to grammar

which is assigned as morphological and syntactical level of language (morphosyntax). Linguistically, it is true that grammar in a broad sense consists of phonology (sound system), morphology (word system), syntax (sentential rules), and semantics (linguistic meaning), but in a particular sense the use of the term grammar refers to the level of morphology and syntax (see Culicover, 1976; Lyons, 1987). The meaning (semantic level) makes use of the language form in the denotative and connotative hierarchies. Then, the function develops the denotative and connotative meanings to communicative

meanings in relation to linguistic and extra-linguistic context.

Language teaching approaches or methods may have accommodated the nature of language as described by the linguistic theories. However, language teachers should not forget that language is a psychological, social, and dynamic phenomenon. Language is not static, and neither is language teaching. In accordance with this, it is sure that teaching English as a foreign language in Indonesia, moreover at university level, faces various problems. Those may be caused by many factors which can be categorized into linguistic and nonlinguistic factors.

Human's competence and performance on language depend upon the mastery on language components and language skills. Language components, as stated by most experts, are sounds (pronunciation or phonology), vocabulary (lexical items), and grammar (morphology, syntax, including semantics), while language skills are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The three components of language have equal contributions to support human's language competence and performance. However, it is highly argued here that in learning English as a foreign language, grammatical aspects should be in the important position. A serious problem on grammar may cause a serious problem in verbal communication since grammar has natural and conventional rules in a language.

At Indonesian universities, the English grammar is frequently supposed and judged as a confusing and boring subject. Many factors, either linguistic or non linguistic ones, are the causes of such opinion. It could also be proved that the difficulties and the problems are made by the students as a reason not to learn the English grammar seriously. In addition to this, it has been reported by researchers that the teaching learning process of English grammar was considered boring, monotonous, and not communicative. Theoretically, such condition may cause difficulties and educational problems in

obtaining the ideal learning objectives (see further Gunn and McCallum, 2005: 38).

For years, many researchers and the experts on language teaching, including English language teaching, have tried to study the effectiveness of using English (the language being learned) as the instructional language in the classroom activities, including in the teaching of grammar. They believe that the use of English as the instructional language in the teaching learning process may direct learners to learn and to use English as much as possible. However, this monolingual approach has not been mostly successful (see Mattioli, 2004: 21; Tang, 2002: 36). Recently, experts of language teaching have believed that the use of learner's first language in English classroom may be good to help students understand the language aspects as well as language skills. Moreover, some researchers reported that in recent decade the use of mother tongue (first language) as the classroom instructional language was highly helpful in the learning of the second or foreign language (Schweers JR, 2003; Tang, 2002).

For most Indonesian people, bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian) is not mother tongue (first language). They have their own particular mother tongues, namely local languages. There are hundreds of local languages spoken by their speech communities with specific characteristics. However, as the national language and instructional-formal language in Indonesia, bahasa Indonesia is learned since the beginning age. Thus, most people learn bahasa Indonesia as they come to formal schools. In accordance with this, although bahasa Indonesia is not the real native language for most learners in Indonesia, the use of the language could ideally be regarded as the use of the first language in the classroom interactions of higher educational level.

In order to know the effectiveness of using bahasa Indonesia compared with the use of English itself as the instructional language in teaching English grammar at the English Department of FKIP,

Universitas Bung Hatta Padang, an experimental research was conducted (Refnita, 2006). The research tried to find the answer whether or not the use of bahasa Indonesia as the instructional language in teaching Grammar I subject was more effective than the use of English. It had been hypothesized that the use of bahasa Indonesia as the instructional language in teaching Grammar I subject was more effective than the use of English.

Quantitative statistical analysis of the data showed that there was no significant difference of effectiveness of the use of bahasa Indonesia compared with the use of English as the instructional language in teaching Grammar I subject at the English Department of FKIP, Universitas Bung Hatta Padang. The research result accepted the null hypothesis which stated that there was no difference of effectiveness between the use of bahasa Indonesia and that of English as the instructional language in teaching Grammar I subject. Theoretically, the use of bahasa Indonesia to explain basic concepts and grammatical items of the English language would be more effective, but it wasn't. In fact, the alternative hypothesis proposed by Refnita (2006) in her research was not accepted. How did it happen?

This article is aimed at explaining and discussing some possible pedagogical and psychological reflections of how teaching grammar at universities should be. Specifically, the writer would like to discuss two types of pedagogical and psychological reflections of teaching grammar at university based on the rejection of alternative hypothesis of the experimental research conducted at the English Department of FKIP, Universitas Bung Hatta (see Refnita, 2006). The discussion is the development and further interpretation of the writer's research result, particularly on the sides of pedagogical and psychological points of view. Some data and factual information presented in this article are those from the experimental research.

## **B. A BRIEF REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES**

### **1. Grammar and the need for teaching it**

That language consists of three main components; form, meaning, and function, has been a universal agreement in linguistics. It may be categorized as well that language has psychological and abstract aspects used and followed by people conventionally. Cherry in Jufrizal (2001) describes that the physical or concrete aspects of a language are understood as complete corpus of all utterances spoken by groups of people in a particular period. Meanwhile, the abstract aspects of a language are those of sets of symbols and rules which are conventionally possessed and followed by the speech community. According to Lyons (1987: 133) the term 'grammar' goes back to a Greek word which may be translated as 'the art of writing'. More recently, the term 'grammar' has developed a narrower interpretation. Grammar, then, comes to the sense that it gives rules for combining words to form sentences. In this sense grammar refers to morphology and syntax (morphosyntax). It may also refer to the formal aspects of language as opposed to meaning aspects of the language. In a broader sense, grammar of language is the description of rules and formal system of language which consists of, at least, four components, namely: lexicon (morphology), sounds (phonology), clause/sentence (syntax), and meanings (semantics) (see Culicover, 1976). In this article, the term grammar is understood as the system, rules, or forms of acceptable utterances which belong to sound, words, sentence, and meaning of language. However, the term is particularly referred as morphosyntax supported by the sound and meaning systems of a language.

In addition to the above ideas, language components involve sounds (pronunciation or phonology), vocabulary (lexical items), and grammar (morphology, syntax, as well as semantics). The three components (aspects) of human language have equal contributions in supporting

human's language competence and performance. It is sure that language competence and performance have something to do with language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). It is argued here that in learning English as a foreign language, grammatical aspects need high and serious academic attention. Why should it be so? The communication might be going on although there are some mispronunciations in the communicative events. In this case, the mutual understanding could be held and supported by the communicative features. In other side, many unfamiliar vocabularies (words) are possibly guessed through the context of communication. If someone has a serious problem in grammar, however, he is supposed to have a serious problem to understand spoken and written language. His writing and speaking will also be difficult to be understood if the grammar he uses is not correct.

Dixon (1992: 4—6) points out that a language consists of words and grammar. Grammar itself has two points, namely morphology and syntax. Even though the grammatical aspects of a language are mostly referred to as morphosyntactical features of a given language, underlying both grammar and words there is semantics. As language use, meaning is both the beginning and the end point. Consequently, the study of language must consider the meaning. There is a principled interaction between the meaning of a word and its grammatical properties.

The need for having a serious attention to grammar in language teaching, including in the teaching learning process of English as a foreign language, is not questioned anymore. Bygate et. al (1994: 5) argue that since the beginning, for many teachers, grammar had never gone away: the conservatism of some and the canny eclecticism of many others maintained the tradition of explicit teaching of grammar even when such teaching was officially out of fashion. Leech in Bygate et.al (1994: 18—19) adds that in the context of foreign language learning, communicative ability in

the broadest sense -- both productive and receptive—appear to be an overriding aim. Grammar is both communicativeness and systematicness which involve the interrelatedness of different things that need to be learned. Seeing grammar as a system means being able to appreciate the relationships among units, rules, classes, and structures within the grammar code itself, and between them and their functions, so that the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts.

If teaching grammar is necessarily needed, then what type of grammar should the teacher bring in to the classroom teaching learning process? This question may arise some different answers depending upon the aims of grammar teaching. However, most classroom teachers are in the same opinion to say in simple way that grammar is rules. In relation to this, three types of grammar may come to teacher's consideration in particular, namely reference (descriptive) grammar, prescriptive grammar, and pedagogical grammar (see Chalker in Bygate et.al, 1994: 31—34). Crystal quoted by Chalker in Bygate et.al (1994) says that reference grammar is a kind of grammar which must be as comprehensive as possible; prescriptive grammar means usage grammar for native speaker; pedagogical grammar is the one designed for teaching a foreign language, or for developing an awareness of the mother tongue. In accordance with these definitions, pedagogical grammar is the one the teacher brings into the classroom in the teaching of English grammar as a foreign language like in Indonesia.

## 2. Using L1 as instructional language in teaching foreign language grammar

It has been known so far that grammar teaching has been held by teachers of foreign language grammar (say English, for instance) by means of two approaches, namely monolingual approach and bilingual one. In the monolingual approach, the instructional language used should be the same as the language learned. Therefore, if

it is the English grammar teaching, the instructional language in the classroom must be English, even though it is the teaching of English as a foreign language. Ideally, those who are in this approach believe that the use of English in the teaching-learning process of English grammar may direct learners to use English as much as possible. In contrast, bilingual approach allows the teachers to use the learners' native language (L1) as the instructional language although the use of the target language is suggested as well. Many researchers and foreign language teachers have found that the monolingual approach has not been so successful (see Mattioli, 2004: 21; Tang, 2002: 36). In other side, some researchers reported that in recent decade, the use of first language/mother tongue (L1) as the classroom instructional language is highly helpful in the learning of second or foreign language (see further Schweers JR, 2003; Tang, 2002).

Professionals on second language acquisition are further conscious about the importance of first language (L1) role in English learning, both as a second language and as a foreign language. Nunan and Lamb (1996) in Tang (2002: 37), for instance, state that teachers of English as a foreign language who teach learners who are not able to speak English smoothly found that to avoid using L1 is impossible. Furthermore, Dornyei and Kormos (1998) as quoted by Tang (2002: 37) found that L1 was used by L2 learners as the communicative strategy to compensate their less ability in L2. Tang herself as a foreign language teacher of English has been experienced in using L1 in order to simplify the foreign language teaching learning process. Research results and teaching experiences on foreign language (in this case English as a foreign language) described by Tang (2002) informed that the use of L1 in foreign language classes is not a problem, but it is necessarily needed.

Psychologically and practically, many researchers and experts on L2 and foreign language teaching argue that the use

of L1 in L2 or foreign language teaching learning process could be helpful. The use of L1 was helpful in problem solving of certain points which need deep understanding and conceptual comprehension. In this case, the use of L1 is regarded as a natural way of problem solving as far as it is used in making fundamental and conceptual comprehension. The use of learners' L1 is also possible to build fundamental framework of L2 or foreign language structure in students' mind. It is argued as well that the balanced use of students' L1 and language learned should be considered academically in order to have a successful foreign language learning (See Tang, 2002; Mattioli, 2004).

Auerbach (1993) in Schweers JR (2003) in similar opinion states that to begin English learning and teaching with the use of learners' L1 would give "safe-feeling" to the learners, so that they are possible to express themselves. This condition is expected to have a positive effect to learners' psychology and mental eagerness to do experiment in English. Schweers JR (2003) adds that using Spain in English classrooms in Puerto Rico could be 88.7%. It means that the use of L1 in L2 or foreign language classroom has not been a "taboo" or an "enemy". In reality, the use of L1 as instructional language or as a communicative strategy in problem solving has been the fact that may be debatable, especially for the followers of monolingual approach. However, the use of L1 in effective ways has been proved to have a positive effect by researchers.

Coming back to the teaching of English grammar in Indonesia, especially at university level, the use of bahasa Indonesia is theoretically useful. Using bahasa Indonesia as the instructional language in Grammar I class, for example, would not give any negative effects as frequently worried about by monolingual followers because the study of grammar is mostly related to linguistic and specific characteristics of English grammar. Theoretical reviews and some research

results might be the basis for having a conclusion that the use of L1 in L2 or foreign language teaching learning process, moreover in Grammar classes, should not be avoided, but is recommended in some critical points. However, this theoretical conclusion needs further studies and testing based on empirical cases on the field.

### C. DISCUSSION

1. The effectiveness of using 1 in teaching English Grammar at Universitas Bung Hatta

Theoretically and psychologically, it had been hypothesized that the use of bahasa Indonesia as the instructional language in Grammar I teaching learning process at the English Department of FKIP, Universitas Bung Hatta was more effective than the use of English. The hypothesis implied that the use of bahasa Indonesia as instructional language in the class of Grammar I would cause the learners' scores higher compared with those gained by the learners taught by using English as instructional language. However, an experimental research conducted to test this hypothesis revealed a different result. Quantitative analysis of the research data showed that there was no significant difference of effectiveness of the use of bahasa Indonesia compared to the use of English as the instructional language in teaching Grammar I subject at the English Department of FKIP, Universitas Bung Hatta. In other words, the null hypothesis of the research was accepted, while the alternative hypothesis proposed in the research was rejected (see Refnita, 2006).

The rejection of the alternative hypothesis was supported by the result of analysis of covariance towards the posttest scores obtained by the experimental group (the group taught using bahasa Indonesia as the instructional language) and the control group (the group taught using English as the instructional language). The value of F-table was 1.005745539, meanwhile the value of F-table at the degree of freedom 1,66 and the level of significance 95% was 3.99. The following table shows the value

of F-calculated as the result of data analysis by means of analysis of covariance:

Table 1: The result of analysis of covariance

Source of Variation	Degree of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Residuals	
			Mean Square	F
Between	1	32.408	32.408	1.006
Within	66	2,126.714	32.223	
Total	67	2,159.122		

The rejection of the alternative hypothesis raised a question, what language was more effective as the instructional language in teaching Grammar I? To find the answer to that question, Refnita (2006) did an additional statistical analysis by adjustment of means. The result of the analysis showed that the class taught using English (control group) had statistically higher mean score than the class taught using bahasa Indonesia (experimental group). The adjusted mean score of control group was 4.760476961, while that of experimental group was 0.939052933. The comparison of these two adjusted mean scores indicated that English was more effective than bahasa Indonesia in teaching Grammar I at the English Department of FKIP, Universitas Bung Hatta.

2. The pedagogical and psychological reflections of the research result

That the use of bahasa Indonesia as the instructional language was not more effective than the use of English is interesting and challenging to be studied further. Why was it so? Theoretically, using L1 (bahasa Indonesia) in Grammar I class of English Department of FKIP, Universitas Bung Hatta was supposed to be helpful, particularly in problem solving cases and in building basic framework of English grammar in students' mind. But, empirically, the use of English was more effective. How could it be? Related to the phenomenon, it seems that quantitative studies and data, as well as materialistic issues, could not give satisfying answers. It needs qualitative; pedagogical and psychological explanations then. It is

argued here that the rejection of the alternative hypothesis in the research contains some pedagogical and psychological reflections.

It is believed that using bahasa Indonesia in teaching Grammar I at university level has positive effects. Using bahasa Indonesia, as a matter of act, is not rejected. The case of the rejection of the alternative hypothesis in the experimental research executed to see the effectiveness of bahasa Indonesia in Grammar class was not the real fact which says that using L1 was meaningless and using language learned (English) was meaningful. In writer's opinion, instructional language used in teaching learning process of English Grammar has an important role because most grammatical items of English grammar are different from those of bahasa Indonesia or bahasa Minangkabau (learners' L1). But, it should not be forgotten that instructional language used in the teaching learning process is not the only factor which determines the learning result. Additionally, educational factors which influence the learning result may come from many sectors, such as the system of education, curriculum, environment, facilities, human factors, and thers. This article does not discuss all the educational/pedagogical factors as the reflection of the rejection of the alternative hypothesis proposed by Refnita (2006). This article discusses only three pedagogical reflections as the implication of the research result.

The first pedagogical reflection of there was no difference between using bahasa Indonesia (L1) and using English as the instructional language is that the experimental group and the control group had not started from similar starting point. The pretest scores of the two groups collected before the treatment was given implies the case. The control group had lower mean score or grammar ability than the experimental group did. As the result, the control group that was taught using English did not have any problems on some grammatical aspects of English; most

students in this group had higher scores in English grammar. In other side, the experimental group that was taught using bahasa Indonesia faced many problems in understanding English grammar; most students in this group had lower grammar ability. If only the two groups being compared had started at an equal starting point of grammar ability, the result of the research might have been different. In order to prove it, of course, further research on this problem needs to be conducted.

The second pedagogical reflection towards the research result is that the use of L1 in a foreign language teaching, say in Grammar I teaching, might be much more effective if it was used at the classes that had parallel basic competence and eagerness. If the experimental group had had as good basic competence and eagerness as the control group, the alternative hypothesis might have been accepted. It means, basic competence and eagerness are factors that influence learning results. Related to this fact, the rejection of the alterative hypothesis proposed by Refnita (2006) reflects that the success of teaching learning process and the scores obtained by the students are not merely the effect of using L1, but pedagogically influenced by basic competence and eagerness possessed by the learners as well.

The third pedagogical reflection that could be derived here is that the learners are human beings and the language they learn is humanistic phenomenon. In his reflection, teaching English grammar to Indonesian people, moreover to university students, is not a machine-made matter. Using L1 in explaining grammatical points of a foreign language may build conceptual framework in learners' mind at the time of teaching learning process. However, it is not a guarantee for having a permanent knowledge since the others factors of education may get lack of attention. Education does not only need building conceptual understanding, but also other pedagogical factors such as whole involvement (mentally and physically

involvement), reviewing, and practicing. These factors were rarely found in the experimental group.

What, then, are the psychological reflections which may be arisen from the rejection of the alternative hypothesis? There are, at least, two psychological reflections argued in this article, namely: (1) motivation and learning readiness are much more necessary than the instructional language in order to have successful learning; (2) adult learners need self-learning strategy in addition to understanding conceptual-grammatical features of language being learned. Those two reflections may have further-detailed explanation based on psychological points of view. A brief explanation given here, however, is only related to general psychological argumentations which have relationships with education and foreign language learning.

Stern (1994: 375—379) gives an explanation and an illustration based on psychological and educational studies about the role of learners' motivation, attitudes, and personality factors, including learning readiness. According to him, any language teacher -- and for that matter, any learner -- can testify that language learning often involves strong positive or negative emotions. Language teachers often treat the importance of motivation as self-evident. Learners' motivation and their attitudes towards what they learn may have strong-internal factors in order to come to a positive personality factor of learning. Then, those would work in such a way to build learners' learning readiness. Gardner in Stern (1994) sees in attitude and motivation a principal cause of more or less successful learning. Related to the importance of having high motivation and learning readiness as positive attitudes and good personality factors in learning, the successful learning on Grammar I does not only depend on the use of L1. Using L1 as the instructional language may, of course, raise self-motivation in some cases, but it is not the only way. There are many other ways of how to raise and develop

motivation which may come to learner's learning readiness. Even though the teaching learning process in the experimental group had been held by means of L1, the use of L1 did not work well because the experimental group members had low motivation and learning readiness.

Using L1 in explaining some difficult points of English grammar may be seen as an external factor which is assigned as external motivation. Although the external motivation has a valuable role, having internal motivation does, in fact, have higher contribution to better learning result. Brown (2001: 77—82) illustrates the need for motivation in educational process, including in learning a language. According to him, intrinsic motivation is, of course, not the only determiner of success for a language learner. But, if the learners are given an opportunity to "do" language for their own personal reasons of achieving competence and autonomy, those learners will have a better chance of success than if they become dependent on external rewards for their motivation. Accordingly, teachers need to maintain learners' intrinsic motivation by means of appropriate strategies so that the extrinsic motivation is transferred in such a way into intrinsic motivation. It may be stated again that using L1 in Grammar I class without learners' good motivation and learning readiness would not be quite effective way to increase the learners' achievement.

The second psychological reflection stated here is that adult learners need self-learning strategy in addition to understanding conceptual-grammatical features of language being learned. Fine understanding on grammatical features, as the result of clear explanation by means of L1, might become "passive knowledge" if the learners do not possess self-strategy to activate the knowledge. They have to mentally and psychologically construct the knowledge as active knowledge in order to possess fine competence and performance. University students are adult learners who have had independent ways of thinking and constructing learning inputs into their active



knowledge. Related to this, learning inputs, in this case English grammatical inputs served by using L1, would not have satisfying effects to learning achievement unless the learners themselves have appropriate self-learning strategy in addition to understanding conceptual-grammatical inputs.

The discussion so far describes general pedagogical and psychological reflections in relation to teaching English grammar at university level. It can be stated that teaching English grammar at university does not only need to build a fine understanding on grammatical features. The understanding on these crucial features is really needed, but how to transfer the understanding into well-formed competence and performance is much more necessary. Using L1 is believed as a good strategy in teaching English grammar since some grammatical features of English are quite different from those of learners' L1. However, there are some pedagogical and psychological factors, as the reflections of rejecting the alternative hypothesis proposed by Refnita (2006) in her experimental research, that should be considered by the lecturers in order to have satisfying learning achievement.

#### **D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

It is believed that using L1 may have positive effect on the students' learning achievement on English grammar at university level in countries where English is not the first language. However, using L1 is not the only way to activate and to develop students' comprehension on the foreign language grammar. The fact that showed there was no positive effect of using L1 in teaching Grammar I on students' grammar achievement has pedagogical and psychological reflections. Those reflections, as discussed above, become items to be considered in order to have better result of grammar teaching learning process. In addition, pedagogical and psychological factors could not be forgotten in educational process, including

in teaching learning process of English grammar.

As stated above, the discussion presented in this article has not been in details yet. Further pedagogical and psychological discussions are really needed then. Thus, some particular argumentations and discussions need to be criticized and studied more deeply. Any further discussion and research on this topic are really welcome.

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