

THE STUDENTS' VIEW OF THE FUNCTIONS OF MOTHER TONGUE IN GENERAL ENGLISH PROGRAM OF ABC COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to find out the students' opinions on the use of mother tongue and its functions in Indonesian EFL classrooms. The data were the interviews with a total six students from level 1, 2 and 3 comprising one high achiever student and one low achiever student from each level. The findings show that all of the students agree that Indonesian can be occasionally used in the classroom by both teacher and students for a number of reasons: for the teacher to explain new and difficult vocabularies, explain grammar rules, organize tasks, maintain discipline, gain contact with individual students, for the students to ask and answer questions, communicate and discuss with classmates and for translating activities. The findings also show that the low proficiency students prefer to use Indonesian more than the higher proficiency students because of lack of vocabulary.

Keywords: mother tongue, function, language proficiency.

The argument whether teachers should use mother tongue in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom has been a major issue in foreign language learning. Some researchers claim that the use of mother tongue should not be used in foreign language classrooms. Those who are against the use of mother tongue in EFL classrooms state that the use of mother tongue can cause problems, such as negative transfer, which usually occurs to learners and therefore, it should be eliminated as much as possible (Lado, 1957 as cited in Cook, 2001). Moreover, according to Polio and Duff (1994, p.324 as cited in Cook, 2001) "using target language as much as possible is important, thus, mother tongue should be set aside". On the contrary, some other researchers think that the use of mother tongue can make a valuable contribution to the learning process. Smidt (2008) states that language learning will be more successful if the learners are given access to use their mother tongue in the classroom setting. Moreover, Cook (2001) also states that there are some ways that mother tongue can be used positively in the classrooms as a part of teaching and learning process.

The debatable issue about the use of mother tongue in EFL classroom is an important matter that teachers and students should be more concerned about, especially because English is considered a foreign language in Indonesia. The teachers' concern is crucial since the teachers' knowledge about the functions of mother tongue in English classroom will influence the students' motivation and interest in the language learning. Karahan (2007, p. 84) states that students who have positive orientation toward learning language tend to perform a better outcome. In this study, the researcher would like to find out the functions of mother tongue in English classrooms. Therefore, this study aimed to find out the students' opinions on the use of Indonesian and its functions in Indonesian EFL classroom. Moreover, many experts in the field of second language and foreign language acquisition agree that mother tongue should be used by students who are not highly proficient in the target language (Atkinson, 1987; Tang, 2002; Auerbach, 1993). This may suggest that mother tongue plays an important role in language teaching, especially for the students who have low proficiency. Therefore, this study also aimed to find out the similarities and/or the differences between the high achiever student and the low achiever student from each level, as well as the similarities and/or the differences between the high achiever students across levels and the low achiever students across levels on the use of Indonesian and its functions in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

In this study, the main theory used is a study by Cook (2001). According to Cook (2001), behind the avoidance of the use of mother tongue in EFL classrooms, there are some positive ways of using mother tongue in the classrooms. The classification of the functions is made considering four things, they are efficiency: whether something can be done more effectively through the L1, learning: whether L1 can help the students learn the target language, naturalness: whether the participants feel more comfortable in doing things in L1 rather than the target language. Cook (2001) classified some positive ways of using mother tongue positively in the classroom which consists of three big umbrellas: first, how teachers convey meaning which covers, teacher's use of L1 to convey and check meaning of words or sentences, and teacher's use of L1 to explain grammar. Second, teacher's organization of the class which covers: teacher's use of L1 to organize tasks, teacher's maintenance of discipline through L1, teacher to gain contact with individual students through the L1, and teacher's use of L1 for testing. Last, students' use of L1 within the classroom which covers: students' use of L1 as a part of the main learning activity.

METHODS

In this study, the researcher used qualitative approach. This study involved six students of ABC course comprising two students each from level 1, level 2, and level 3. From each level, the interview was done to one high achiever student and one low achiever student in the classroom. These students were selected based on the teachers' assessment in terms of their scores and performance. The main source of data in this study was the result of the interviews. Thus, in order to get the data from the interview, the researcher prepared two voice recorders. Two voice recorders were used to make sure that the whole interviews were well recorded and clear enough to be transcribed.

Before conducting the interview to the participants, the researcher did a pilot interview to check the clarity of interview question items, eliminate ambiguous questions, and to evaluate whether the voice recorders work well. After conducting the pilot interview, the researcher met the real participants and asked for permission to do the interview and explained that the interview would be supported by voice recording. Once the student agreed to be interviewed, the researcher and the participants made a schedule of the interview together. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian. It was because by using Indonesian, the participants would be able to express their opinions better and deeper. The interview consisted of some questions. The first three questions were the starter questions, and the rest of the questions were related to the students' opinion about the use of mother tongue in the classrooms. The questions besides the started questions were developed during the interview in order to get deeper information. Once the researcher finished with the interview recordings, the researcher, the voice recordings were transcribed by using clean transcription. Lastly, the researcher analyzed the interview results which are discussed in the findings section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part contains, the students' opinions on the use of Indonesian and its functions in Indonesian EFL classrooms, the similarities and/or the differences between the high achiever student and the low achiever student from each level, as well as the similarities and/or the differences between the high achiever students across levels and the low achiever students across levels on the use of Indonesian and its functions in Indonesian EFL classrooms will be discussed.

The students' opinions on the use of Indonesian and its functions in Indonesian EFL classrooms

Based on the interview with the six students, the researcher found out that all of the students agree that Indonesian can be used in the classroom. However, every student has different opinion on what functions Indonesian should be used. In addition, the researcher found out that the higher proficiency students prefer to use less Indonesian because they want to maximize the target language. In contrast, the lower achiever students prefer to use more Indonesian because they have limited vocabulary, or have no motivation in learning English. Therefore, it can be concluded that explaining in Indonesian is more understandable and time efficient.

Table 1.1 The students' opinions on the use of Indonesian and its functions in Indonesian EFL classrooms

| Functions | Level 1 | | Level 2 | | Level 3 | |
|--|---------|----|---------|----|---------|----|
| | LA | HA | LA | HA | LA | HA |
| Functions based on Cook's classification: | | | | | | |
| Conveying and checking meanings of words or sentence | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Explaining grammar | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Organizing tasks | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Maintaining discipline | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Teacher gaining contact with individual students | ✓ | | | | | |
| Testing | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Using MT as a part of learning activity | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Students' use of mother tongue within classroom activities | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Other Functions: | | | | | | |
| Asking questions to the teacher | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Teacher's answers to the students' questions | ✓ | ✓ | | | | |
| Teacher use of L1 to give examples | ✓ | | | | | |
| Students' use of L1 to prepare a presentation | ✓ | | | | | |
| Teacher' use of L1 to explain materials beside grammar | | ✓ | | | | |
| Teachers and students use of L1 to plan a class outing | | | | | ✓ | |
| Students use of L1 to do a class presentation | | | | | ✓ | |

Notes: HA: High achiever students LA: Low achiever students

The table shows that all of the six students from the different levels of proficiency agree that the teacher's use of Indonesian to convey and check meaning of words or sentence is necessary. The main reason is that it is more understandable which helps the students can learn the language better.

The same level, different classification

For the level 1 students, both the low achiever and high achiever students from level 1 agree that the use of Indonesian in the classroom is essential because they have limited vocabulary. Both students agree that Indonesian can be used by the teachers to convey the meaning of the difficult words or sentences, by the students to communicate with classmates and ask questions to the teacher, by the teacher to respond the students' questions. Moreover, both of the students from level 1 also agree that Indonesian can be used by the teachers to explain grammar, maintain discipline, organize tasks, and for translating activities. However, the low achiever student from this level states that it is better if the teacher explains grammar, the meaning of the difficult words and organizes the tasks in two languages, in Indonesian first and then explains the same thing in English. By doing so, she can also learn English from the teacher talk. In contrast, the high achiever student from this level says that explaining grammar rules should be done in Indonesian so that she can understand it well. She adds that for organizing tasks and maintaining discipline, the teacher can use both English and Indonesian. English can be used if the instructions are simple, yet Indonesian should be used by the teacher to give long and complicated instructions. In addition, the low achiever student from level 1 agrees that Indonesian can be used by the teacher to gain contact with individual student, such as, giving motivation because using Indonesian to give such motivation is more inspirational. In the contrary, the high achiever student from level 1 thinks that it is okay for the teacher to praise or give motivation to the students in English. It is because those things are not related directly to the lesson. Whenever she does not understand, she would ask her friends or look up the dictionary. Both students show disagreement in the use of Indonesian for preparing presentation. For the low achiever student, preparing presentation in Indonesian is really helpful and easier, yet for the high achiever student, it is not necessary because she can do it in English. Therefore, it can be concluded that the low achiever student from level 1 needs to use

more Indonesian in the classroom than the high achiever student. It is because the high achiever student from this level has more knowledge about English than the low achiever.

Next, both students from level 2 agree that English should be used as much as possible in the classroom. However, when the students reach the limit when they cannot speak in English anymore, they can speak or ask in Indonesian. Both students also agree that Indonesian can be used by the teacher to explain difficult words. The students from level 2 also agree that using Indonesian for the teacher to organize tasks and to gain contact with individual students are not necessary. In addition, the low achiever student from level 1 agrees that Indonesian can also be used for the teacher to maintain discipline and for the students to communicate among classmates to avoid miscommunication. In contrast, the high achiever student from level 2 thinks that for the teacher to maintain discipline and organize tasks can be done in English, so that the students can get more exposure to English. It can be concluded that both students from level 2 prefer to use more English than Indonesian. It is because they have enough vocabulary to understand the teacher talk and explanations. However, since they have not mastered English, sometimes Indonesian should be used to make things easier to understand.

Both students from level 3 agree that the teacher's use of Indonesian to explain difficult vocabularies is necessary since a word might have many meanings. Therefore, it is clearer when the teacher explains difficult vocabularies in Indonesian. However, both students disagree to use Indonesian for the teacher to explain grammar, maintain discipline, and for the students to ask questions and answer teacher's questions. It is because they are able to do those things in English. Moreover, they also think that the more exposure to English, the better the students will be. Besides, both students show differences in the use of Indonesian for the teacher to organize tasks and for the students to communicate with classmates. According to the low achiever student from level 2, the teacher can organize the tasks by using Indonesian because he often misunderstands what the teacher says. He also prefers to communicate with his classmates in Indonesian, except for the class discussion, because he is not confident talking in English. However, it can be concluded that the high achiever from this level thinks that those things can be done in English since she already understands them well. It can be concluded that both students have enough knowledge to understand English. However, the low achiever students from level 3 is not confident enough and thinks that he is not good at English which makes him think that more Indonesian should be used. On the other hand, the high achiever student from level 3 is confident speaking in English and confident that she can understand the teacher talk in English.

Different levels but the same classification

Based on the analysis, the researcher found out that there is some similarities and differences between the high achiever students and the low achiever students across level about the use of Indonesian and its functions in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

Table 1.2 The similarities/differences between high achiever and low achiever students across levels

| Classification | Similarities/ Differences | Functions | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
|----------------|------------------------------|--|------------------------------|----------|-----------|
| High achiever | Similarities | Explaining the difficult words | Agree | Agree | Agree |
| | | Teacher gains contact with individual students | Disagree | Disagree | No answer |
| | | Translating activities | Agree | Agree | Agree |
| | Differences | Explaining grammar | Agree | Disagree | Disagree |
| | | Teacher organizes tasks | Agree | Disagree | Disagree |
| | | Maintaining discipline | Agree (only for simple ones) | Disagree | Disagree |
| | | Asking questions to teacher, teacher | Agree | Disagree | Disagree |

| | | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|---|-------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| | | answering question | | | |
| | | Communicating with classmates | Agree | Disagree | Sometimes disagree |
| Low achiever | Similarities | Teacher giving meaning of difficult words | Agree | Agree | Agree |
| | | Translating activities | Agree | Agree | Agree |
| | Differences | Explaining grammar | In both languages | No answer | Disagree |
| | | Teacher organizing tasks | Agree | Disagree | Sometimes agree |
| | | Teacher gaining contact with individual student | Agree | Disagree | Disagree |
| | | Communicating with classmates | Agree | Agree | Agree but not for discussion |
| | | Teacher maintaining discipline | Agree | Agree | Disagree |
| | | Asking questions to teacher and teacher answers | Agree | Agree, only in an urgent situation | Disagree |

All of the high achiever students from all levels show some similarities that Indonesian can be used by the teacher to explain difficult vocabulary, gaining contact with individual students, and for translating activities. However, they also had some differences. The high achiever student from level 1 thinks that it is necessary for the teacher to use Indonesian to explain grammar, organize tasks, and for the students to communicate with classmates and ask questions to the teacher. However, the high achiever students from level 2 and 3 think that it is not necessary to use Indonesian for those things, and it should be done in English. Moreover, the high achiever student from level 1 thinks that the teacher should maintain the class discipline in Indonesian. However, for simple warnings, such as the do and don'ts can be done in English since it is understandable. In contrast, the high achiever student from level 2 and 3 think that it is should be done only in English so that they get more exposure to English. It can be concluded that the high achiever students from level 2 and 3 have more knowledge about English than the high achiever student from level 1 that the students from level 2 and 3 think that using Indonesian for most cases is not necessary.

Next, the low achiever students from levels 1, 2 and 3 showed some agreements that Indonesian can be used for the teacher to explain new and difficult vocabularies, for the students to communicate with classmates, and for translating activities. However, they also show some disagreement. The low achiever student from level 1 agrees that Indonesian should be used in the classroom most of the time because she has limited vocabulary. However, the low achiever student from level 2 and 3 think that the use of English should be maximized in the classroom, so that the students get more exposure to English. However, the low achiever student from level 1 and 2 think that it is necessary for the teacher to organize tasks in Indonesian to make sure that the students understand the teacher's instructions well. In addition, the low achiever students from level 1 and 2 agree that teacher should maintain discipline in Indonesian. It is because by using Indonesian, the students are able to understand what the teacher says and be able to discipline themselves. The low achiever student from level 1 also agrees that Indonesian can be used by the teacher to give motivation to the students, because it sounds more inspiring and valuable. She also agrees that it is necessary to ask questions in Indonesian, because she does not know to ask in English. It can be concluded that the low achiever student from level 1 need to use more Indonesian because she has limited vocabulary and knowledge about English. Being at level 3 means that the students have enough knowledge to understand most of the teacher talks in English. However, it seems that the low achiever student from level 3 is not confident enough with his English skills that he thinks he needs to use Indonesian for some cases.

There is a similarity between all of the high achiever students and all of the low achiever students. The high achiever students from level 1 agreed that Indonesian should be used for most cases since she had limited vocabulary. In addition, both the high achiever students from level 2 and 3 agreed that the use of target language should be maximized. Similar to the low achiever students, the low achiever student from level 1 agreed that Indonesian should be used for most explanations and conversations in the classroom because she had limited vocabulary, yet the low achiever student from level 2 and 3 thought that more exposure to English is important.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that all of the students agree that Indonesian can be occasionally used in the classroom by both the teacher and the students for a number of reasons: for the teacher to explain new and difficult vocabularies, explain grammar rules, organize tasks, maintain discipline, gain contact with individual students, for the students to ask and answer questions, communicate and discuss with classmates and for translating activities. This study reveals that the use of Indonesian can help the students feel easier to understand the teacher's explanations, feel more comfortable, save time, and learn English more effectively. The findings also show that the low proficiency students prefer to use Indonesian more than the higher proficiency students, because they do not have enough vocabulary to understand the teacher's talk nor to communicate with others. Moreover, the other personal causes, such as, motivation, mood, and also interlocutors' ability to speak English also influence the students' preference in using Indonesian. Students who think English is difficult tend to lose their motivation and think that English is too hard. Therefore, they need to use Indonesian. Although some students already understand English, sometimes they prefer to use Indonesian because they are not confident speaking in English or they are not in the mood to speak in English. In addition, interlocutors also play an important role whether the students would speak English or Indonesian. If the interlocutors do not understand English, automatically the students will use Indonesian to communicate with them even though the students themselves are able to speak English.

It can be concluded that the students, especially the lower proficiency students from any levels, agreed that mother tongue used in the classroom is necessary for the teachers to give explanation to the students, and for the students to communicate or ask questions to the teacher, and for students to communicate among students. There are some reasons of why Indonesian should be used in the classroom, such as the teacher's use of Indonesian for explaining things will make the explanation easier and quicker to understand which means it is time saving. Moreover, saying things in Indonesian is sometimes more natural than saying things in other languages. Therefore, using mother tongue in the classroom is beneficial. However, it does not mean that everything should be explained in Indonesian. Using English more in the classroom is also necessary. By using more English in the classroom, it means that the students are exposed to English. In order to learn English better, it is necessary for the students to get exposed to English as much as possible, so that the students will get used to hear anything in English and be able to understand English.

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