

## ACQUIRING ENGLISH AT THE EXPENSE OF BAHASA INDONESIA?

By Julia Eka Rini

Petra Christian University

As English has been increasingly gaining importance in Indonesia despite its position as a foreign language, lots of parents think that they should make their children able to speak English as early as possible. They send their children to English courses and speak English at home. This is of course all right as long as they do not see Bahasa Indonesia as an unimportant language to master. Acquiring English can be done without taking the children's privilege as the native speakers of Bahasa Indonesia.

An article for parents about mother tongue and English which has a reference from Krashen (2004) (<http://esl.fis.edu/parents/advice/intro.htm>) say several points that are worth knowing concerning maintaining the native language while staying in another country (where English is not a foreign language as it is in Indonesia).

**How does the mother tongue help the learning of English?** Research\* has shown that many skills acquired in the first language can be transferred to the second language. So, for example, if your child has developed good reading skills in Korean, she is likely to be able to apply these skills when reading English. ... Another one is the ability to decide which new words in a text are important to look up in the dictionary and which words can safely be ignored.) For this reason it helps if you can encourage your child to read good fiction and non-fiction in her own language. Similarly, the skills of being able to plan out a piece of writing or develop an argument in a persuasive essay can be applied in the second language once they have been learned in the first.

**What are the other reasons for maintaining and developing mother tongue proficiency?** Firstly, many children in international schools plan to return to their home country at some point to continue their education there. This is a strong reason to make sure they do not have gaps in mother tongue language or cognitive development. And secondly, ESL students who turn against or otherwise neglect their mother tongue can often suffer from problems of identity loss or alienation from their parents, and from their grandparents or other family members in their home country.

**How can ESL students best develop their mother tongue proficiency?** For some students, developing mother tongue proficiency is easier because they have lessons each week in their native language. For students who are not in this fortunate position, there is still much that can be done to maintain the mother tongue. ...

Your children will learn English much more effectively if they continue to develop their first language at the same time.

\* "In early stages it [reading in the first language] can profoundly accelerate the development of reading ability in the second language." This is true because 1) reading skills transfer from language one to language two; 2) reading provides knowledge of the world that makes second-language texts more comprehensible; 3) the pleasure of the reading habit itself transfers to the second language.

If this advice is for parents who do not live in Indonesia, this is more true for those who live in Indonesia.

Two important reasons that are worth paying attention to are related to the life of the children in Indonesia. First, it is not funny if they, as Indonesians, have gaps in their own Bahasa Indonesia. The second point mentioned is more serious, namely loss of identity or alienation from relatives or people they know. This might not be regarded as something serious by parents because they are "bystanders." Certainly this will not be comfortable for the person who experiences it; moreover, if s/he is a teenager.

Mastering English without sacrificing Bahasa Indonesia has been proven in three children's experience. The first child was born in 1993 (now she is the six-semester student of Food and Technology at Widya Mandala University Surabaya; the second in 1994 (now she is the third semester student of

Visual Communication Design at Petra Christian University Surabaya; and the third in 1997 (now he is at the second year of high school in Garum, Blitar). The mother was born and grew up in East Java and the father in Flores. The mother and the father use Bahasa Indonesia. The grandparents used informal Bahasa Indonesia. Other people in the house who use Bahasa Indonesia were the baby sitters because they are from Flores and did not speak Javanese or informal Indonesian. When there was a Javanese helper, very often than not, the helper also spoke Indonesian, because the baby sitter(s) did not understand Javanese. The helper only used Javanese when she spoke to the grandparents. The children were mostly with the baby sitters when their parents were not at home.

In the house Bahasa Indonesia was mostly used in daily interaction between the parents, the children, the baby sitters. However, books, films, songs and posters were in English or bilinguals, English and Indonesia. The three children were conditioned to listen to English language in their early lives, starting from two years of age. When they watched cartoon films, the films were in English. As they still did not know how to read, the Indonesian subtitles did not anything to their understanding of the spoken utterances. They just relied on their listening ability. When they wanted to understand the story, they asked their mother who accompanied them watching the film; they asked her later when their mother was not around. As an example, the oldest child who was four years old at that time asked, "Hold your tongue' *itu artinya apa?*" (what does it mean). "*Kamu tahu itu dari mana?* (Where do you get that?)," asked their mother. Then, the child told her mother the scene in *Cinderella*, and the mother explained it in Bahasa Indonesia. The children later on never have problems in the listening tests at school. When they took TOEFL tests in their teenage years, they have the least mistakes, only 10%, in the listening part. All of the three of them are confident in speaking English with foreigners; the second child even chose to be interviewed in English when she enrolled to the vocational school.

Grammar lessons in school were made use to teach them English grammar. When they do not understand the grammar, they asked their mother in Bahasa Indonesia and she explained it to them in Indonesian also. Since the three of them mostly have English exposure from films and songs, they have difficulties in grammar and in their TOEFL test it was the structure part that lowers their score. The structure part has the most mistakes.

Reading gives a lot of influence to the children. The first and third children like reading in Indonesian. The first child read *Little House on the Prairie* series in Indonesian starting 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Elementary school. She took piano lessons and had piano exams of which the materials are in English. The examiners were Japanese and English. Now she also reads books on food technology and biology in English. The third child is now at the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of high school. He likes reading in Bahasa Indonesia and in English. The second child did not like reading books; she read comic books (she likes drawing and painting).

Table 1. Scores of national exams and TOEFL Prediction score

| Scores                 |     | 1 <sup>st</sup> child | 2 <sup>nd</sup> child | 3 <sup>rd</sup> child |
|------------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| National Exams         | SD  | 9.71                  | 7.60                  | 8.47                  |
|                        | SMP | 9.4                   | 7.6                   | 7.7                   |
|                        | SMA | 9.2                   | 9.3                   | -                     |
| TOEFL Prediction Score |     | 577                   | 433                   | 510                   |

The habit of reading might probably explain why the second child did not reach 500.

Writing was not observed. Now the first child, who is now at the 6<sup>th</sup> semester, is an editor of the student journal of food technology at Widya Mandala University. The third child is now at the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of high school. Last month he was sent by the school to join English writing contest as the school representative.

English can be acquired without taking the children's privilege as the native speakers of Bahasa Indonesia. Indonesian children can be introduced to a foreign language as early as possible. It is possible to use English as an introductory language in Indonesian schools?

## References

<http://esl.fis.edu/parents/advice/intro.htm> retrieved on August 25, 2013

Krashen, S. (2004). *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. Heinemann. Portsmouth