

**THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH TENSE BY LOWER EDUCATED PEOPLE: A CASE**  
**STUDY OF AN INDONESIAN WOMAN**

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**Absract**

This is a case study about the acquisition of language by an Indonesian low education woman. This research is proving the theory in order to know the influence of age factor toward English language acquisition. Although the participant's studying English naturally is too late, that is at the age of 28, if it is compared to the theory of second language acquisition in which the critical age is at puberty level, the hypothesis proposed is that the participant can get the proficiency level expected that is the minimal of 75% because she has high motivation and willingness towards English. This research focuses on tenses analysis, particularly, Simple Present, Simple Past, and Present Future. The data is collected through interview technique with natural setting. Among the 52 verbs used, 36 (62%) are in the form of Simple Present, 6 (11.5%) are in the form of Present Continuous, 5 (9.6%) are in the form of Present Continuous which is not perfect, 4 (7.7%) are the combination of Simple Present and Present Continuous, and only one verb (1.9%) is in simple past tense form. No response towards the two other tenses, Simple Past Tense and Present Future shows that the participant does not know those two tenses. Therefore, this research proves what Bongaerts, etc. in Singleton and Lengyel (eds) (1995:30) claims that adults experience great difficulty in achieving second language proficiency level, and Johnson and Newport quoted by Towell and Hawkins (1994:27) that incompleteness develops in accordance with the age: the older someone involves in the second language, the more incomplete the grammar of the second language, is true.

Key Words: *Language Acquisition, Low Education Level, Case Study.*

**Introduction.**

The acquisition of a second language by lower or non-educated people seems to occur naturally. This study aims to investigate the language acquisition of lower educated people. This study is focused on analysing the English tenses, particularly, simple present, simple past, and present future.

Erni, an Indonesian woman having only junior high school education, participates in this study and agrees to use her name in this study. She came to Australia following a family which has three children. Her main jobs are preparing food for the family, washing and ironing cloths, and taking the children to school. She has enough chance to communicate in English with people. Her English background is very poor which was only her experience during at school about fifteen years ago. Now she is 29 years old. It seems that she picks up the language naturally. Therefore, her experience in

learning a language, ie. English is interesting to be studied.

Relating the participant's level of English to the age factor is an interesting thing to do because she arrives in Australia at the age of 28. Bongaerts, et al. in Singleton and Lengyel (eds) (1995:30) propose that adults or parents experience great difficulty in achieving high levels of L2 proficiency. Thus, by knowing her acquisition level of English tense, it will prove whether or not what is claimed by Bongaerts, et. al is also experienced by the participant. Furthermore, Johnson and Newport cited by Towell and Hawkins (1994:127) signify that "incompleteness grows progressively with age: the older you are at first exposure to an L2, the more incomplete your L2 grammar will be". In other words, I also want to investigate whether the late start of acquiring a foreign language influences the participant's level of L2 proficiency or L2 grammar.

### The Participant's Context and Biography.

Erni came from the low average family. Her parents could not support her study, and therefore, she just stopped her education until she finished her junior high school. In order to earn money, from very young age she had to work, such as doing the household, selling rice, and washing as well as ironing students' cloth in the dormitory near her house, until she got married.

Three months after giving birth, she started working again, and the same situation kept continuing until her sister in-low introduced her to Ratna, a lecturer in Jambi University. Ratna is continuing her study in Australia and needs someone to take care of her children.

Dealing with her education, as mentioned above she only graduated from junior high school. It can be said that she has low education level according to Indonesian context. It is true because by only graduating from this level of education, she cannot use her education background to find a better job.

In relation to the language she uses, her first language is Sundanese and her second language is Indonesian. She learnt English when she was in junior high school. Most of the students who only graduate in junior high school, nearly can say nothing in English. This situation might be true since English in Indonesia is a foreign language.

In March 2005, she came to Australia, especially Melbourne. After the first four months of working here, she feels that she likes the country very much. Everyday her main job is to put two of the children to childcare in the morning and to take them up in the afternoon. Moreover, she also learned to go shopping by herself.

There is a positive attitude toward English that I catch from the participant's behaviour when being recorded. Although she knew nothing about English when coming to Australia, she did not feel

worried about that. She just thought that she had to work for her lovely son. Her willingness to put her son to the higher level of education really motivates her to do anything she can.

By having involved in the English speaking environment in the first six months of working in Australia, she felt that her interest in English appears. She said that she became interested in listening to parents, teachers and children speaking English in childcare. Furthermore, together with the children she also started to be familiar with English. By only having experience in the environment, after six months of staying in Australia, she started to understand English, even she could utter it word by word; especially everyday English which she experienced in childcare.

After the six months of working in Australia, there has been another activity that she does, namely making Indonesian cookies and put them to some shops in the city. By doing this activity, her experience in the language use continues increasing. She can speak simple language with the shopkeepers and can explain simply about the cookies she makes. Moreover, she said that she always speaks with one of the tram conductors if she meets in the tram. All those activities that she does seem to show that her motivation in learning English is quite high.

Besides having experience in English in the situations mentioned above, the participant also uses English at home, especially with the children. Furthermore, she also often communicates with her neighbour who is from New Zealand. She also said that she likes to watch television a lot. It is believed that this activity also supports her English.

Of all experiences and activities that the participant does, the participant feels that childcare is the most useful learning environment that shapes and supports her English. It may be true because in the first six months of staying in Australia, she often spent her time there getting involved in conversation with mothers and teachers, while she put the children in the morning. When she is on duty looking after the children in childcare for three days a week and one hour each day, she has to do some activities dealing with taking care of the children with the other two or three mothers and teachers. She said that she enjoys it very much because she can communicate with other people who speak rather fluently in the context of simple everyday English.

#### Acquisition and Learning.

There are many theories dealing with the terms and definition of acquisition and learning. In order to guide this study, these two terms are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Krashen cited by Ellis (1994:14) distinguishes between acquisition and learning. He clarifies that “acquisition refers to sub-conscious process of ‘picking up’ a language through exposure, while

learning refers to the conscious process of studying it". This definition explains that acquisition is gained through the sub-conscious process while learning is gained through the conscious process.

Another definition is proposed by Klein cited by Ellis (1994:12) who uses the terms spontaneous and guided acquisition. He explains that in spontaneous acquisition "the learner focuses on communication in naturalistic second language acquisition and thus learns incidentally, while in guided second language acquisition, the learner is in instructed second language acquisition, the learner typically focuses on some aspects of the language system". In other words, it can be said that spontaneous acquisition is language acquisition itself and guided acquisition is language learning. Klein, furthermore, claims that "it is wrong to assume that naturalistic learning is subconscious and instructed learning is conscious." It may be true to say that natural learning acquisition is gained without being instructed while guided learning acquisition is gained through instruction.

By seeing the two process of acquiring second language above, it is difficult to decide which process is better than the other one. Carroll cited by Pienemann, M and M. Johnston (1987:49) finds that "a natural learning environment is superior to a formal one. On the other hand, a number of studies are cited which suggest in various ways that instructed of indeed effective." But, as one of the English teachers in Indonesia in which English functions as a foreign language, the author is brave enough to say that natural learning is superior to a formal one in terms of fluency. This can be argued based on the author's experience in learning English through a formal one and seeing the facts of learning English through a natural environment in Australia. She has learned English since she was in junior high school until university level, but her English fluency is still far from native speakers. However, the participant, who has low education level, and only has experience one and a half years in natural learning, can speak fluent enough. Moreover, some of the author's friends who are not from English department, their speaking is fluent after having experience in natural language learning while they are studying abroad. In other words , natural learning is very good in promoting/gaining the fluency in speaking a language.

Related to the topic of this study, that is to see the acquisition level of English tense of lower educated people, I will refer to the standards given by the linguists. Ingram in Phienemann and Johnston (1987:124) defines "levels of second language proficiency at nine (potentially twelve) points along the path from zero to native-like proficiency". In other words, if someone achieves score 75%, it can be said that he/she has acquired certain aspect or topic of that language. Furthermore, Brown in Ellis (1994:74) explains that "a criterion level of accuracy can be determined whether a feature has been acquired, usually the level is set at 80 - 90 percent,...". From the two theories above, it is clear that the lowest grade someone should gain in order to achieve the acquisition level is 75%.

After knowing the participant's acquisition level of English tense, I will relate with the age factor which is also interesting. The participant came to Australia when she was 28 years old. On the other hand, many theories proposed that the age really influences second language learner's acquisition. One of the theories is proposed by Gass and Selinker (1994:239) who state that "children are better language learners in the sense that young children typically can gain mastery of a second language, whereas adults cannot." This theory implies that adults cannot achieve as good results as young children can do. Furthermore, Patkowski in Gass and Selinker (1994:241) claims that "learners who acquired English after the age of puberty received lower proficiency scores than did either the native speakers or non native speakers who started learning English before puberty." Concerning with the participant who has experienced in natural language acquisition when she was 28 years old, it can be said that it is quite late and based on those two theories above, it might be impossible for her to achieve high frequency level of English. However, I want to prove this theory, whether or not the participant can achieve the level of acquisition required, since she has good motivation, interest, as well as contact with social environment.

### Settings.

As has been discussed before in the participant's context and biography that since coming to Australia, she never learns English through formal occasion, such as joining a course, etc. She picks up a language through experience in the environment. Therefore, it may be true to say that this study takes place in a natural setting.

Ellis (1994:214) indicates about natural settings, namely "natural learning occurs in the learner's contact with other speakers of the L2 in a variety of situations such as in the work place, at home, through media, etc". These situations are experienced by the participant in which she has a contact with L2 speakers in childcare, the neighbour at home, and television as a media. Furthermore, Ellis (1994:12) clarifies "naturalistic second language acquisition as a language which is learnt through communication that takes place in naturally occurring social situations." It is clear enough that in natural setting second language acquisition, the learner gains his/her language acquisition through having experience in communication with L2 speakers in social situation.

### **Methods of Collecting the data.**

Interview technique which is set in the form of informal conversation is used to collect all of the information required. This data is recorded by audio-tape in a natural setting. The conversation is made

as natural as possible allowing the participant to spontaneously tell her experiences. Therefore, it can be mentioned that the data of this study is taken from spontaneous performance. According to Smith (1994:62) in collecting language data, spontaneous data collection should be used in order to gain natural language. Since the data is collected spontaneously, it should be conducted in a relaxed and informal situation, so that the participant can respond the questions or express her ideas freely.

In regard to the topic of the study, namely to see the participant's level of English tense, especially simple present, simple past and simple future, three questions which elicit the participant's responses are provided, namely the participant's daily activities when she worked in Australia, her daily activities now and her work plan for the future.

Before doing the recording, the participant is informed that the language use is English. During the recording, some elicitation are offered in order that the participant feels relax and easy in giving responses. After the data are collected, they are transcribed and put in the tables. In order to know the participant's level of acquisition in English tense, those verbs appeared in the tables are calculated in the summary table. Subsequently, the calculation is compared with the requirements of the acquisition level which are proposed by the linguists.

### **Findings**

The researcher was surprised by the information coming out during the conversation with the research's participant. From all of the expected data, there is only about 35 % which are appropriate with the research aims. Most of the information was expressed in the form of simple present tense. Furthermore, besides in the form of present tense, some of the data are obtained in the form of present progressive and some are in the combination between simple present and present progressive. The data presented in the table are only in the form of verbs. The following are responses of the three questions which are put in the summary table.

**Summary Table**  
**Summary of Verb Calculation in Those Three Question Responses**

<b>S. Present</b>	<b>Present Prog.</b>	<b>Incomplete</b>	<b>Other Forms Combination</b>	<b>Simple Past</b>
1. 9	4	2	1	1
2. 19	1	3	1	-
3. 9	1	-	2	-
36	6	5	4	1

The table shows that most of the responses are given in the form of simple present, namely 36

verbs, or 62 %. Furthermore, there are 6 verbs in present progressive form, or 11,5%; and 10 verbs appear in other forms, or 16,2 %; 5 verbs are in incomplete progressive form, or 9,6 %; 4 verbs are in combination of simple present and present progressive, or 7,7 %; and only 1 verb is in simple past form, or 1,9 %. The two other tenses, simple past and present future, do not appear in the participant's responses and only one verb appeared in simple past.

From the available data, in which most of the responses are in simple present, only one verb in simple past and no verb in simple future, it can be interpreted that the participant does not recognise those two tenses. This can be realised because simple past, for example, is at stage four of the 'natural order' for L2 acquisition which is proposed by Krashen cited by Ellis (1994:94). On the other hand, it is understandable that some of the responses are in the present progressive since in that natural order, 'ing' form is at the first stage, (ibid:94). It implies that present progressive is commonly acquired by the second language learner before he/she acquires simple past.

Another possibility of the absence of those two tenses is the influence of L1, or may be in this case the influence of both L1 and L2 on the participant's foreign language. Pienemann and Johnston in Nunan (ed) (1987:47) and Wolfram (1985:229) argue that L2 acquisition might be influenced by L1. Since the participant's first language is Sundanese and her second language is Indonesian, it seems that these languages influence the word forms appeared in English tenses. Most of the verbs rising have similar form. Moreover, simple present might be easier for her to acquire because she gets experience of everyday English in her environment which is mostly in simple present form.

In relation to the possibility mentioned above in which the learner seems to acquire simple present tense, another reason of the absence of the two other tenses is over generalisation. It can be argued that this aspect is often appeared in many situations, such as the use of 's' ending for the third person singular subject, regular and irregular verbs. One of the given responses, for example, she mentions: "I say ..." and "Ratna say ...". Therefore, the effort of eliciting or guiding the participant to the two other tenses simply cannot assist the investigation to obtain the intended information.

## **Conclusions and Suggestions**

Based on the interpretation above, it is clear that the participant's level of English proficiency in those three proposed tenses is low, since the only one expected tense appeared. Furthermore, by referring only to the second question responses dealing with the simple present situation, the learner could respond correctly with 19 verbs among the 24 verbs she used, or it is 79 %. Therefore, it can be argued that she already acquires simple present tense. However, the general responses show that she

has not acquired enough English. From 52 verbs altogether, there are 36 verbs in simple present tense, or 62,2 %. This implies that the participant has not acquired simple present yet, or she has not acquired any of those three tenses proposed.

From the finding above, in which none of those three tenses being acquired by the participant, what is proposed by the linguists, namely the older the learner starts learning the second language, the lower the proficiency will be, is shown by the experience of the participant. Although she has good motivation and interest in learning English, her acquisition level of English tense is still low. This proves that only motivation and interest are not enough to be used in acquiring the second language. In fact, age plays an important role together with other factors.

Since this study only analyses the influence of age factor toward the second/ foreign language acquisition, particularly English Tenses, other studies which focuses on different aspects of the language, such as morphology, phonology, semantics, etc, might be carried out. Moreover, other factors which might influence the acquisition of a language such as motivation, interest, etc might also be researched in further studies in order to get complete understanding about second language acquisition.

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