

# A VIEW ON BLEY-VROMAN'S FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDONESIAN HIGH SCHOOLS

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## Abstract

English as a subject has been a part of curriculum in Indonesian schools from primary to university study for several decades now. The decision of education authorities to include it as a compulsory subject in high school is based on the fact that English has played an important role as academic language that is universally used, as well as the belief that having good English proficiency will enable Indonesian young people to face the fierce competition in global world. However, this policy does not run without challenge. Problems in mastering the language are encountered by both teachers and students, and results of the learning are not always as expected. This is a signature of foreign language learning as elaborated by Vroman in his book (*The Logical Problem of Foreign Language Learning*). This paper reviews on how the characters of language learning proposed by Vroman are seen in Indonesian classrooms at high school level where English is learned as a foreign language.

**Keywords:** *English, foreign language, Indonesian high schools.*

## I INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the many countries in the world using English for several purposes without really making it as an officially used language in government or educational levels. In Indonesia, English has become a compulsory subject in high school levels comprising of three-year study in junior level and another three years in senior level. This means that English is included in national exam that determines Indonesian students' eligibility to continue to the next level of study. Alwasilah (2001) argued that English should be part of Indonesian curriculum because the language helps Indonesian young people making progress in their life which in the end affects the quality of life in the country in general. It is also affected by the fact that access to information and technology—two elements that are inseparable from the current world of education—is made easier when one masters the language (Tsui and Tollefson, 2007).

Indonesian government sets a 12-year compulsory study for all Indonesian children. Even though English is not a compulsory subject for elementary education, it has been generally included as a semi-elective course in many schools. This means that a general Indonesian student learns English for about twelve (12) years, starting at the average age of 6 years old when a child starts formal schooling until 18 years old when he or she finishes high school. However, despite the long formal exposure of English in the classrooms, it is still hard for Indonesian students to master the language to a degree of fluency that is, although might not be native-like, is free from the basic problems such as pronunciation and accuracy.

This phenomenon reflects Vroman's explanation about fundamental characters of foreign language learning that covers issues from its lack of success to fossilization that slower the process of a foreign language mastery. This library study is conducted to give a glimpse of perspective on how these characters are seen in the real classroom settings at higher study in a country learning English as a foreign language.

## II MATERIALS AND METHOD

In order to untangle the question of how some characters of foreign language learning by Vroman are manifested in real settings of Indonesian high schools, sources of materials are collected from books, journals, articles, proceedings, and reliable online sources. These materials are then selected to fit the framework of the research and to avoid off-track discussion. Since the study does not include direct classroom observations, deskwork or library research is conducted to collect the data. The data found are then classified according to each type of character being discussed to provide relevant empirical evidence that a particular foreign language learning character does exist in Indonesian high schools.

### III RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A language is considered foreign if it is learned in a classroom and it is not used for communication in the society where the language is taught. Therefore, the term of language learning refers to a process of second or foreign language mastery that involves formal instructions and is done in classroom settings (Moeller and Catalano, 2015). English has been taught and learned as a foreign language in Indonesian high schools for some time now and its importance is increasing continuously, especially with the introduction of ASEAN Economic Community.

At the beginning, English was taught as an elective subject for higher level studies such as high school and university. Then it gained more importance and has become one of the compulsory subjects that is learned for the period of at least 6 years from junior high to senior high studies where English become one of their compulsory subjects. As the global world advances, the need to learn the language increases and it is found out now that English is learned not only for academic purposes but also for business and even pleasure. Indonesian companies hire graduates with better English proficiency, and score in English Proficiency Test such as TOEFL or TOEIC has now become one of the required documents for job application (Fahrawati).

Ironically, even though Indonesians have studied the language for so many years at school, most of them still have a hard time mastering the language and using it for whatever purpose they were or are studying the language for. This phenomenon reflects the characters of foreign language learning elaborated by Vroman in his book titled *The Logical Problem of Foreign Language Learning*.

#### 3.1 LACK OF SUCCESS

According to Vroman, lack of success is the most striking feature of foreign language learning, especially in adults. It is true that one's cognitive learning capacity may have an effect on his language learning and so causes the imperfect mastery of the language, but another thing needs to be considered is the absence of language faculty in adults' brain that hinders them from mastering a new language easily.

This is reflected in English learning in Indonesia. Many of high school graduates in Indonesia—who are assumed as having studied the language for at least six years—are still having difficulty in using the language in communication, especially in direct or face-to-face communication. They might be fluent at some degree, but problems in accuracy are sometimes still prominent and at times might cause strain for the listeners. Therefore, it is common to find Indonesian high school students taking extra lesson from private or public English courses to enhance their English learning.

#### 3.2 GENERAL FAILURE

A complete success is a rare case in adults' foreign language learning, if not non-existent. This is especially true in regard of 'accent' used in English and ability to make automatic and subtle grammatical judgment. Unlike children who have innate domain language faculty that makes language learning much more effortless for them, adults mostly rely on general cognitive ability which Selinker considered as insufficient for achieving thorough success of new language mastery (1969).

Based on a series of observation conducted in four classrooms of high school students in 2011, a research found that even after elaborate language presentation and example by teachers and further peer-practices, it was still hard for the students to use the language items learned in spontaneous conversation and role-play. The students understood the form, meaning, and the function of the language presented by the teacher, but using it in non-guided activities proved quite a challenge (Abidah, 2011). Some students performed better than others did, but there were still hesitations and pauses where they stopped to think of the right English sentence structure for what they had in their mind in Indonesian. As the result, the speech or conversation produced was not in perfect English sense. For example, when asked to talk about an embarrassing experience in their life, many students used *I am embarrassing* instead of the expected expression of *I am embarrassed* to express their feeling.

#### 3.3 FOSSILIZATION

Fossilization is an ever-existing phenomenon in foreign language teaching and learning. The term refers to a stage where a student eventually stops in his or her learning. This is usually experienced by a student who has reached a certain stage of learning where success is minimal and then he or she stabilizes at this level. This usually happens to students who have achieved a particular degree of fluent communication using the language even though sentence structures are unlike that of an English native speaker. Once the students reach this stage, initiating change becomes a highly challenging effort. After

some corrections from teachers, they might change for a while, but after a moment of break, all the old forms reappear.

Budiarsa (1995) in a comparative study in Balinese English learners found that Balinese students studying English have difficulty in pronouncing several consonant sounds in English non-existent in Balinese language. It is true that mother tongue, in this case Balinese, is of a major influence in the learning process, but repetitive drilling in those particular sounds proved to not resulting in long-lasting change. After some time, the students went back to replacing /ð/ with the sound of /d/ since Balinese does not have the former sound in its phonological system. Several similar studies in different Indonesian local language such as Javanese show more or less the same result of learners not being able to maintain the native-like language they have learned due to the obvious reasons.

#### IV CONCLUSION

The number of research that addresses the many facets of foreign language learning in adults is enormous. However, having one of its aspects depicted through reports from real-classroom context give further perspective of how it is implemented. It then can be concluded that some fundamental features of foreign language learning elaborated by Vroman do exist in real language learning in Indonesian high schools. The manifestation of these features can be found in the myriad research and observations on how English as a foreign language is taught and learned in Indonesian high schools. Further library research needs to be conducted in order to find more evidence on this particular issue.

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