

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Nowadays children are easier to learn language compared to old period children. In the last three decades, there is a tendency that most parents send their young children to kindergarten before entering the first grade. Young children are sensitive to changes and should be accustomed to knowing new things including schooling.

Kindergarten functions as the young children mental and physic anticipation before attending the formal schooling. Kindergarten is a traditional introduction to school for 5 years old, an optional year of transition between the relative freedom of home or preschool; and the structure of formal schooling (E. Papalia and Olds 1990).

No need to say that as part of language development, all children learn to define words consciously or not. Those children learn to define words to get the same point of understanding, so they become active members of families, peer groups and societies.

E. Papalia and Olds in their book entitled *A Child's World: Infancy through Adolescence* describe that in the United States there is a strong emphasis on preparing kindergarten students for the first grade by teaching them letters and numbers. Many of them now spend a full day in class rather than a traditional half-day.

In Indonesia, kindergarten has the same function and objective as in the United States. The difference lies on the time kindergartners spend in class. Many Indonesian kindergartners spend half-day in class rather than full day in class. Furthermore, the function of kindergarten seems to undergo an extension. The kindergartners, especially those who live in big cities are to learn to draw, color, punch, sing, understand and even write words.

The phenomenon above enables today's kindergartners to have a higher ability to define words. One thing should be remembered is that they are only able to define the familiar words around them because they tend to talk about the 'here' and 'now' phenomena.

Brown in Levin and Gibson 1985 says that children have more concrete terms in their vocabulary because it is learned in very concrete situation. The ability to appreciate concreteness is a product of much learning rather than the primitive state of mind. On the other hand, vocabulary is so dependent upon experiential background, dialect, culture and other social variables. So, it is very interesting to investigate kindergartner's understanding and knowledge of words since he learns them from his teachers and friends in addition to learning them from his parents and surroundings.

According to Taylor and Taylor 1990, a child must possess certain metalinguistic competence to define a word in mature way. For example, an Indonesian kindergartner defines *anjing* (Ind., meaning *dog*) as *binatang jahat yang punya taring dan pernah makan kucing* (Ind., meaning *a fierce animal which*

has fangs and eats cat). Lacking of metalinguistic competence, a child may lengthen a word or even say some words which do not exist.

Cognition and language are very dependent to each other. This view is suggested by Piaget and presented by Berman in Pfaff. It says that all language learning is cognitive in essence – apart from psychological, affective and social factors since cognition has to do with knowledge and the mind in general.

Word is defined as any sound or combination of sounds that the child uses consistently with a clear referent (Bee: 1975). Words can be defined by using longer compounding words.

I believe that Indonesian kindergartners' word definition is influenced by their personality, their parents' attitude, daycare and schooling. The personality of kindergartners begins to be observable. The parents' attitude toward them begins to stick in their minds. Furthermore, the most important reason of choosing kindergartners as the objects of my research is that I believe kindergartners begin to be able to be the mature partners of child – adult conversation.

Children's maturity in defining words increases as they grow older. Gradually, definitions become more sophisticated. Based on maturity input theory, I do a research on kindergartners' ability to define words.

With the ultimate purpose to find out the ability of 4 – 5 years old kindergartners to define words, kindergartners' words definitions are assessed by showing pictures. The results of their definitions are investigated and analyzed by using componential analysis.

1.2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Children's word definitions show their maturity of language development. Based on that finding, I investigate their ability to define words. I define the problem as follows:

1.2.1. How is the quality of 4 – 5 years old kindergartners understanding of word meanings?

1.3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study based on the statement of the problem is :

1.3.1. To find out the quality of 4 – 5 years old kindergartners' understanding of word meanings.

1.4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study attempts to provide a real description about kindergartners language – skill that is their ability to define words along with their intellectual development. Only few adults know that the ability to define words can be a measurement of children's intelligence. As yielded by Stanford Binet word definition is one item of a verbal intelligence test. The Stanford – Binet Intelligence Test is supposed to be a measure of practical judgment in real – life situation. I hope this study will be able to give a clear explanation about the maturity input in the child's language development.

This study might be useful for some professionals such as linguistic scholars, psychologists, and kindergarten teachers. Furthermore, kindergartners' parents are the ones that might get the maximum advantage because they play the most important role in developing their children's intelligence. However, it should be borne in mind that children's achievement in formal schooling is also affected by their kindergarten experiences.

1.5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A child must build a vocabulary, acquire the standard meanings of words and learn to use words as adults do to broaden the horizon of communication. Kindergarten children tend to define words in immature way. Taylor and Taylor in their book *Psycholinguistics: Learning and Using Language* states that a child acquires word meaning by adding semantic features to her incomplete lexical entry. The features range from general to specific.

For the child, the meaning of a word involves distinctive features (Gibson and Levin: 1985). It will be recalled that in acquiring distinctive features, the child is motivated to distinguish features that contrast the meanings of words.

According to dual feature model, word meaning is decomposable into two sets of features: a few abstract and relational defining features and several perceptual and characteristic features (Taylor and Taylor: 1990). This model explains further that kindergartners first learn perceptual features because they are concrete. Furthermore, those features can be sensed and observed. The characteristic features are also learned because they are possessed by typical

members of a class or category. The perceptual and characteristic features become the basis of underextension.

Berman in Pfaff focuses on studies of developmental of specific subsystems, particularly among children of different language backgrounds. She states those studies reveal that systems of gender or other means of noun classification may refer to a being's sex, the animacy or shape of an object, but never its absolute size.

Cromer in Pfaff distinguishes between immature and later types of strategies deployed by children in sentence comprehension task. Young children around age two or three tend to interpret strings in terms of their expectations from what is familiar or likely in the real world of events. For instance, that dog barks.

Learning is one of the processes in cognitive processes. Jean Piaget (1896 – 1980) proposes a term called cognitive development. He states that cognitive development involves a restructuring or modification of a previously acquired concept, as a result of the child's interaction with objects and people in her environment. Furthermore, the ability to see meanings in language develops largely after the age of 6. However, it is not around age 8 or 9 that children produce resembling adult definitional form (Crystal: 1989).

1.6. METHOD OF THE STUDY

In this research, the experimental qualitative approach is used. The reason behind the use of this method is that because this study corresponds to the ability of kindergartners to define words. I devise a relevant task namely some pictures to

be defined by the informants. This study is also a qualitative one since the description on the analysis is not ordinarily expressed in quantitative terms.

1.6.1. DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

This study is a psycholinguistic study. Some important terms have been indirectly explained in the background of the study so that the most pertinent terms are defined. I make some reasonable limitations and justifications to the definitions.

1. *Kindergartner* is a child aged 4 – 5 years old attending kindergarten.
2. *Semantic feature* is semantic primitive that takes on + or ~ value.
3. *Immature definition* is kindergartner's definition which only mentions only several aspects of noun or action (participants, objects, processes, instruments, situational contexts, locations)
4. *Underextension* is the narrowing meaning of child's language than an adult language.
5. *Class* is the grouping of objects and events that share many properties. For instance: *papa de, bapak, angkung* are under one class male.
6. *Category* is the grouping of classes that share many properties. For instance: *mama, bapak, angti, angkung* are grouped into a category *keluarga*.
7. *Distinctive feature* is feature that distinguishes similar objects and events.
8. *Componential analysis* is word analysis by using semantic markers.

9. *To define* is to add semantic markers to a kindergartner's word meaning and explanation.

1.6.2. LOCATION AND POPULATION OF THE STUDY

The research takes place in Surabaya. It is clear that some kindergartens in Surabaya offer more various facilities and activities to their students compared to some kindergartens in suburban area such as Malang. This phenomenon encourages me to choose Surabaya as the location of the research.

The population of the research is kindergartners from middle socioeconomic families. I believe that social classes tend to provide different knowledge. It has been claimed by Helen Bee 1981 in her book *The Developing Child*:

“... Children from middle – class homes are more skilled verbally in every respect than are children from working class or poverty homes... children from working – class or poverty families have smaller vocabulary than do children from middle – class families.”

Besides, parents' socioeconomics and education background always show relationship with children's mental growth and intellectual development. Children of wealthy homes where there are more care, more materials such as educative toys, books and more stimulating activities obtain higher learning capacity on average.

Based on the above affecting factors of learning ability, all kindergartners as the populations of this study are to meet the following criteria:

1. Normal children, having no physical or mental retardation.

2. Aged 4 – 5 years old.
3. Attending kindergarten.
4. Being born and raised in Indonesia.
5. Parents' characteristics are:
 - a. Middle class, graduates of senior high school at the minimum.
 - b. Indonesians, live in Indonesia and speak Indonesian fluently.
 - c. Aged not more than 40 years old by the time the research is done.
 - d. Single parents are excluded.

A research on child language acquisition in 1960s used three children as the populations. In this study, I also use three children as the population by choosing the ones who are to meet the populations' characteristics.

I use naturalistic setting instead of controlled setting. I position the mothers as the question givers instead of I myself to avoid a possibility for the informants to keep silent during the conversation. Sometimes, I involve myself during the conversation to get the necessary information.

1.6.3. TECHNIQUE OF DATA COLLECTION

I use observational approach in collecting the data. This approach enables me to observe the children's ability in defining words at their home setting without disturbing the conversation.

It takes several steps to collect the data. Firstly, I give the mothers fifteen pictures. Those pictures consist of three specific – nominal pictures, nine general – nominal pictures, two action – words pictures, and one modifier picture.

Then, I ask the mothers to show the pictures to the children. The words to be defined are taken from those pictures. Each child is to do one task namely giving definitions of some words per day. Since there are fifteen words, I decide to give three days for each task to carry out at interval. Finally, it takes maximally one month to finish defining those words. Basically, the duration and interval to converse is not limited. However, each conversation may take fifteen to thirty minutes to complete.

In short, the procedures to collect the data are:

1. Making initial observation at kindergartens.
2. Choosing the population.
3. Visiting the children.
4. Giving the mothers some pictures.
5. Asking the mothers to show the pictures.
6. Asking the mothers to question the children about the picture.
7. Making recordings.

1.6.4. TECHNIQUE OF DATA ANALYSIS

Several procedures are required to analyze the data. First of all, I select the data of conversation recordings and the necessary notes that I make during the conversation time.

Next, I make tables of interviewing task results. To make it easier to understand, the interview result of each word is put in one table.

Then, I classify the children's responses by using componential analysis. In other words, I analyze the responses by explaining with semantic markers. This kind of analysis provides definitions for all words given as task to define in terms of few components. At last, I provide a qualitative interpretation of the collected analysis tables.

In short, the procedures of data analysis are:

1. Classifying and selecting the data.
2. Making tables of interviewing task results.
3. Interpreting the data.

CHAPTER II

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE OBJECT OF THE STUDY