

WORD-ATTACK SKILLS FOR INDONESIAN LEARNERS

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Abstract: The typical drawbacks that affect most Indonesian learners studying English as the target language concern the strategies in dealing with new dictions. The rule of thumb is that the learners are usually tempted to directly look up the meaning in a dictionary when other ways such as guessing the meaning from the context or by dissecting the words into smaller units so that they are able to get a hint from the base word cannot be engineered. As a result of this activity then, they miss crucial points in the realm of word enrichment. This article will shed some light on how to deal with new words and claim that it is not the meaning of a new word that should be the first priority.

Key words: pronunciation, phonemes, class of words, use

When a lecturer meets freshmen in a General English class in faculties at the beginning of an academic year and asks them what to do when finding unfamiliar words, opening a dictionary is one of the rudimentary answers. As to the next step after opening it, the common answer given is inevitably finding the meaning. The worst of all is when there is no further step taken and they feel satisfied with only finding the meaning.

This rite will undoubtedly bring further disadvantages to the process of language learning development and mastery. When considerable amount of words have been known but a student still finds some difficulties in understanding oral communication, then this can be very frustrating and that s/he may swiftly jump to the conclusion that the target language is difficult.

Another suspected case resulting from this is that there are some graduate students or even S1 graduates who more or less understand English but have problems in either listening or speaking.

It is, therefore, crucial for the article to present some strategies in dealing with new words so that fruitful English language learning can start from the initial step.

Early precaution should be taken in comprehending this because learning English language factually involves other variables. One of them is the prerequisite skills of having mastered or at least been familiar with the English sound system that involves not only the vowels and consonants, but also stress and intonation.

PRONUNCIATION

The ritual of checking the meaning first has to be changed to checking the pronunciation of a new word. In other words, accepted pronunciation plays a very important role in the further step of mastering the language.

Related to this claim, it can be further argued that English sounds are distinct, meaning that even when, for example, *k* exists in English and Indonesian, it is not exactly pronounced in the same way. The *k* in *kill* is pronounced with the back of the tongue upon the hard palate (Robinett, 1978:68) and it is a voiceless velar stop but not in Indonesian. For an action checking in the class can start from the very high frequency words such as, *no, know, now, half*, to increasingly lower frequency words such as, *mirage, determine, choir, tomb, and thorough*, to find out whether the students have paid attention to pronunciation or not yet. Correction of the pronunciation of the mentioned words, and of course, with any additional lists from other lecturers, can surely improve learning.

When Indonesian learners pronounce the words (especially the new ones), they inevitably use their organs of speech. This can be a very good practice, not only for exercising organs of speech but also for fluency in using the word in a meaningful context or utterance.

Another reason why pronunciation has to be placed as the first priority, especially at the beginning stage, is that it affects learners' listening comprehension. In a logical analysis, when a word is being used, it has to be with the same pronunciation in all involved agents in the communication. When the word *thorough* for example, is being used, the encoder has to say /'θʌrə/* and has to be perceived in the same way in the decoder's mind. If the encoder says /'θʌrə/ but in the decoder's mind is, for example, /'θrχ□/ or /'θ]+rχ□/, or the other way

around, miscommunication will happen or proper understanding will not occur. When the percentage of this diversity in the pronunciation is relatively greater, then the communication is consequently getting worse.

Psychologically, on the other hand, when most words being used in the communication have the same or similar pronunciation in the encoder's and also in the decoder's, this will affect the confidence to speak in both agents if they all happen to be learners.

Since pronunciation is suspected to subsequently affect the learners' mastery in listening and speaking, it is crucial to pay attention to it closely and seriously.

The fact that pronunciation work has traditionally been allocated as a secondary role in language teaching is supported by Griffiths (2005): *In my work as a teacher trainer I have been surprised at how often experienced teachers are reluctant to tackle pronunciation issues in class.* Let alone when we try to conduct a tracer study and find out that in Indonesia, this is even worsened by the fact that a great number of teachers, especially those with one or two years' teacher training only, still need to improve their own pronunciation.

As stated earlier, the structure of the sound system involves not only the vowels and consonants, *the segmental features*, but also stress and intonation, *the supra-segmental features*. In addition to this, it is also closely related to the grammar and the lexis. As a result, learning and teaching it is an integrated activity. But, when learning and teaching pronunciation has to be treated as a separated issue, two valid strategies can be presented:

- a. The best model is surely the native speaker's pronunciation. This can be the one prevalent in the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. Varieties may occur and this should not be considered as too rigid. Unless the speaker is sleepy, drunk or ill, all of the varieties are acceptable. If it so happens that a learner is not an excellent receptive learner or when the material is not recorded, listening to one expression once probably will not be sufficient.
- b. The second choice is using the phonetic symbols or pronunciation key in good dictionaries, such as Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary, Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, or Webster's New World Dictionary.

When a learner is in doubt of whether the sentence:

Our focal target is increasing sales figures
will be uttered:

- a. *Our focal /'tʃ+gɛt/ is increasing sales figures*
- b. *Our focal /'tʃ+jɔt/ is increasing sales figures or*
- c. *Our focal /'tʃ+gɔt/ is increasing sales figures,*

looking it up in a dictionary may be recommended.

And when the word is an agenda in the lesson plan, a good tip for teaching pronunciation is given by Stanton (2005): *Remember that all activities for learning phonemic symbols must involve 'listen, look, and say'. That means three senses are involved and if students can handle cards, find things in the room and point to symbols on a chart a fourth sense is involved. Many activities will mean using pen and paper but they should not be done in silence.*

It should be noted here that many Indonesian use analogy to pronounce a word so that they usually utter the word incorrectly. They mistakenly conclude, for example, that **oo** is to be pronounced /ɔ/, which is not always the case, like in the word **flood**. And this has to be stopped if a good command of using English has become the final objective.

The most common strategy in pronunciation teaching is by having contrasting sounds. This can be the contrast among English sounds or the one between the target language and the native language sounds. The target sound contrast should be shown to function meaningfully, i.e., students should realize that it makes an important difference to their intelligibility to use it properly; *He sails to Australia on a big **ship** or He sails to Australia on a big **sheep*** is just to mention as an example. Minimal pairs can also work for sound recognition, such as: *see – she, tack – tag, pig – big, and pot – port*

SPELLING

Knowing the correct spelling of a word well is a prerequisite for successful reading. Robinett (1978) says that in most descriptions of reading, there are two distinct stages in the process: that of relating the graphic symbols in spoken lan-

guage and that of extracting meaning from these graphic symbols. Wardhaugh (1969:133) describes them specifically:

When a person reads a text, he is attempting to discover the meaning of what he is reading by using the visual clues of spelling, his knowledge of probabilities of occurrence, his contextual-pragmatic knowledge, and his syntactic and semantic competence to give a meaningful interpretation to the text

Referring to the beginning of English teaching in Indonesia in which the initial objective is mainly reading comprehension because most subjects are written in English, students usually pay sufficient attention to spelling. In addition to this, automatic spelling checking, when students use computers, adequately facilitates the process of English language learning. But this does not mean that Indonesian learners have no problems with spelling at all. One crucial element that has to be kept in mind is whether the learners spell a certain word automatically and relatively fast or whether some lap of time is needed for every single word. When this happens, exercise in spelling or even a contest in spelling can be considered to gear up the learning and teaching process.

The exercise can start from spelling short phonemes: *bond, risk, lump*, and *cliff*, spelling long phonemes: *struggle, declare, bundle, poem, react*, and *abroad*, spelling compound words: *cardboard, fireplace, grasshopper, watermelon, warehouse*, and *penmanship*, to spelling collocation: *dripping water faucet, a flagpole chain clinking, garage doors squeaking, cheerleaders at the head, sidewalks splashed with water*, and *He has a permanent disability* in replacing the sentence *His disability will continue until he dies* (Hill in Williams, 2005).

Some spelling teaching can go deeper into practising spelling of open and closed syllables, words containing certain vowels or consonants, derivatives, root words, suffixes and silent letters. The depth of the material and the expected level of learner's competence in learning the spelling are crucial in determining the objective.

MEANING

Meaning in this context is the lexical meaning; the one that is found in the dictionary when we want to know what a word means. But a word is rarely stands by itself. It is derived from syntactic or grammatical relationships within the language or the grammatical meaning. A word can also have a very special

interpretation that is brought to each word by both the speaker and the hearer because of each person's own particular, personal experiences and those experiences that are common to the culture of which s/he is a part. In other words, knowing the meaning of a word is an integrated activity.

There are some ways that can be traced as to how the meaning of a word in the dictionary is revealed. This is accomplished by giving the synonym/s, illustration, pictures, description, and examples.

One point that has to be considered here is that an English–English dictionary is highly recommended. This is based on fact that Indonesian learners need to experience how a new word is explained, illustrated, and described. This skill is in fact necessary when s/he wants to do the same thing and the most important of all is that s/he does it in English. It would be relatively more difficult for the learners to have, or example, the explanation in Indonesian but have to express it in English. In addition to this, reviewing the English words that they have known while looking a new word up in a dictionary is another important activity in the process of learning.

CLASS OF WORDS

It should be clear from the outset that every learner should be aware of the fact that they have to know the class of every single word, be it a Noun, Verb, Adjective, or Adverb, and how they are formed so that they will be able to use and understand the word appropriately. In order to give a further detailed example, we can use the word *act* and other formations stemmed from it such as: *acts, acted, acting, activity, actor, actress, active, activist*, and the plural form of the nouns.

When learners understand the class of word and practically study the structure of how they exist, they will understand the following sentences:

- a. She acts well in the play
- b. She acted as the owner of the castle
- c. They all have been impressed by her acting
- d. Her activity is under continuous surveillance
- e. She met the actor she had been dreaming of for years
- f. You can be an excellent actress
- g. Greenpeace is very active in drawing public attention
- h. The activist's struggle eventually ended in vain.

Or when they try to retrieve the meaning of a word from the written expressions, they will be able to grasp the right one. Note should be taken here that some words have more than one meaning in a different context.

In addition to this awareness, students have to study other word creation, such as; borrowing (e.g., funky), coinage (e.g., chug), onomatopoeia and reduplicatives (e.g., honky-tonk), acronyms (e.g., SARS), clipping (e.g., maxing from maximizing), and blending (e.g., dancercise).

USE

The ultimate goal of all the above activities is to lead students toward the attainment of communicative competence in the 'real' world. In this era of globalization, even if one is interested in learning English as a foreign language, one cannot simply understand the language, read books written in English, and stay in exile, but one has to communicate and share with others. Robinett (1978:145) asserted 'We must learn when to use them, i.e., under what circumstances they are appropriate, if we want to truly understand that they mean'.

How we 'use' what we have learned can open the door to innovation and creativity. When one considers that the *think tank* is new and one uses a sentence *She is now one of the think tank in the presidency* in one's email, then, this usually makes a great impact in one's mastery of English. And if the expression is often used in one's daily life this can lead to acquisition.

CONCLUSIONS

When a new word is being the target of comprehension, *pronunciation of the word, spelling, class of word, meaning,* and *use* are all the minimum components that have to be taken into account by the learners. The arrangement of the learning step can exactly follow the pattern or depend on the need. Considering that sounds of the target language are influential in the subsequent mastery of the language, it should be identified as the first priority.

It should be clearly understood that this article should not be regarded as a separate and independent area of English language learning, but as a contributory factor that builds the realm of good English command.

***Pronunciation Key:** voiced /t/ as in **then** in contrast with voiceless /t̥/ as in **thin**, /ʌ/ as in **but, fund, must**, /j+/ as in **more, cord, claw**, /χ/ as in **note**,

phone, coat, /t/ as in run, /ɜ/ the weak vowel in butter, about, forgotten, /t/ as in talk, /ʰ/ as in heart, start, calm, /g/ as in good, /j/ as in yellow, /ɔ/ as in fit, win, list, /t/ as in talk, /ɪ/ as in could, stood, hood.

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