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*by* Abdul Muthim

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# Becoming Polyglots through Formal and Non-Formal Language Education

Abdul Muth'im[1*] & Cayandrawati Sutiono[1]

[1] English Language Education, FKIP Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, Banjarmasin, Indonesia

[*] Abdul Muth'im, English Language Education, FKIP Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, Banjarmasin, Indonesia

*Abstract*

*It is not surprising that there are Indonesian people who are able to communicate only in one language, i.e., their native Language (L1). Some Javanese people—the major ethnic group living in East and Central Java -are only able to communicate in Javanese; some Sundanese people—the second major ethnic group living in West Java -are able to communicate only in Sundanese; and some Banjarese—the people living in South Kalimantan province are only able to communicate in Banjarese. This is especially true for those who never experience formal education and live in villages and remote areas for almost of their lives. For those who have ever gone to and attended formal education, they are usually able to communicate at least in two different languages, i.e., their L1 and Indonesian language, their L2. Even, some Indonesian people are not only able to communicate in L1 and L2, but also are able to communicate in more languages. In relation to these phenomena, the following question is raised: "Why do some people be able to communicate only in one language while some others are able to communicate in more, different languages?"*

*Keywords*

*polyglot, Language Acquisition Device (LAD), First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), Foreign Language (FL)*

## 1. Introduction

Being able to understand and use different languages other than his/her own native language might be the hope of every language learner. By having this ability, it is believed that a number of communicative benefits can be enjoyed. The benefits the learner can enjoy among others are: widening and deepening the horizon and the perspective of his/her life, getting in touch with other members of

community is more easily facilitated, and interacting with other members of community can be more intensive. In short, having the ability to understand and use different languages in various contexts is believed to enable the learner's life easier.

## 2. Bilingual and Multilingual

In general, someone who understands and be able to use two different languages is defined by some experts as bilingual, whereas, one who understands and be able to use more than two languages is called multilingual. The use of these two terms: bilingual and multilingual, however, is not totally agreed by all experts in the field. Sometimes, they use the two terms interchangeably. Brendan (2011), for instance, concludes that any individual who has obtained the ability to use more than one language can be categorized as multilingual. This idea is in line with what Ellis (1994) believes that in multicultural countries like Indonesia, many people are considered as multilingual since they are able to speak more than one language. Ellis (1994) argues that in addition to their first language they also have acquired some competence in more than one non-primary language. Thus, a multilcultural person is also a multilingual for he/she is able to communicate in more than one language.This is at least what can be inferred from what Dewalee's (2015) claims that a bilingual is supposed to have native-like control of two languages.

The situation in which one understands and be able to use multi-languages is called polyglot. The term "polyglot" itself came to its existence in mid 17th century in French *polyglotte*, and in Greek *poluglōttos*. The word *polu*-means "many" and the word "*glot*" means "language". (Online Oxford Dictionary, retrieved at February 9, 2021). So, a polyglot is a person who is able to understand and use many languages. This is in line with what *Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary of English* (2015, p. 1006) defines "polyglot is a person who speaks or understands many languages".

Polyglots can be found in almost every part of the globe. There have always been people of this kind: in the past, at present, and may be in future. To mention a few examples some cases can be presented here. *Sukarno* (1901-1970), the first President of Indonesia, for instance, could speak Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Indonesian, Dutch, German, English, French, Arabic, and Japanese (Ludwig & Arnold, 2002). *Fazlur Rahman Malik* (1919-1988), a Pakistani scholar of Islam, could speak Urdu, Persian, Arabic, English, Greek, Latin, German, and French (Mas'ud, 1988). *Pope Francis*, the former leader of Catholic Church, could speak Spanish and Italian natively, knew Latin, and got by German, French, Portuguese, and English (Valley, 2013). Whereas Alkire (2008), the editor of a book entitles *How I learn Languages*, told that Lomb, the writer, could translate 16 different languages.

## 3. Becoming Polyglot

Becoming polyglot surely makes someone special. This is because by becoming a polyglot the opportunity to get engaged and involved in various activities with different people with different language background is widely opened. However, it does not mean that only special person with

excellent academic achievement and high IQ that can become polyglot. In my mind, anyone may become polyglot as long as he/she has strong motivation and supported by serious efforts and endeavors to grab it. Polyglotism may be achieved through formal teaching and learning language process and it may also be attained through self-directed learning (auto-didactic). The results of some research on this matter and the confession of some popular polyglots may become the justification on this claim.

The result of the study conducted by Noprival (2019) revealed that the polyglots acquired several different languages through a natural process, a learning process, and a mixture of both naturalistic as well as instructed experiences. Other study conducted by Kurniawati (2013) also showed interesting result.The subject of her study was a private English teacher who was able to speak nine languages, i.e., Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, French, Italian, and some other foreign languages. In the effort of acquiring those languages, the subject used English as the bridging language. Amazingly, the subject acquired another new language only in three to four months.

The confessions of some polyglots supported the results of the research above. The interview carried out by Gelman (in Sprachheld's blog) with some polyglots on how they understand and be able to use different languages may become the inspiration for other people (learners) to become polyglots. The polyglots interviewed among others were: Olly Richards, Steve Kaufmann, Richard Simcott, Lydia Machova, and Vladimir Skultety. Olly Richards was a polyglot of 8 languages; Steve Kaufmann was a polyglot of 16 languages; Richard Simcott was a polyglot of 16 languages; Lydia Machova was a polyglot of 9 languages; and Vladimir Skultety was a polyglot of 15 languages. From the interview, Sprachheld concluded that the ways the polyglots learn other than his/her L1 language (Sprachheld's blog, assessed in December, 2020) can be summarized in three methods:

## 4. Speak First

In this method the language learners are recommended to start to speak it with natives as soon as possible: a little at first and progressively more.

### Listen & read first

In this method the language learners are suggested to read and listen to as many texts as possible: progressively increase the difficulty of texts and study missing words.

### Translate first

In this method the language learners are encouraged to begin translating texts from the foreign language to their native language and then vice versa.

From the results of research and the experiences of the world's top polyglots in learning new language, it can be said that their success in becoming polyglots is not because they are special nor they use specific methods. I don't think. From the discussion above I dare to say that they implement the same methods applied by language learners in schools. They listen to the language; they speak the language; they read the language and they write the language. So, becoming polyglots is not something that is

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impossible for language learners.

**Language acquisition**

Polyglotism is understood as the results of language acquisition processes. There are three theories of language acquisition that may be used to explain how a language is acquired: (1) the innatist theory, (2) the cognitive theory, and (3) mothers theory.

*4.1 Innate Theory*

The innate theory (as introduced by Chomsky in Pinker, 1994; Mulyani, 2019) asserts that language is an innate capacity; that a child's brain contains special language-learning mechanisms at birth. With this capacity a child is familiar very well with the whole intricacies of the language system: its sound system, its grammatical system, and its lexical system. For instance, he/she can identify whether the language he/she hears is in accordance with the sound system of the language or not. With this capacity a child can identify whether a combination of morphs in a word or a combination of words or longer combination in a sentence follows the syntactical system of the language or not. And with that capacity a child can identify whether or not the placement of a word in a sentence syntagmatically or paradigmatically is accepted based on syntactical system. With that capacity he/she can differentiate any sound violating the system. It is believed that every normal child—the child that is not deaf and dump—has this capacity and is ready to be used as a means of acquiring any language. That is why it is named as Language Acquisition Device (LAD).

*4.2 Cognitive Theory*

The cognitive theory popularized by Jean Piaget which was then quoted by Wilburg (2010 in Aljoundi, 2014) claims that language is just one aspect of a child's overall intellectual development. The stages of developing intellectual capacity, in accordance with Bloom (1956) cover the category of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This taxonomy is then revisited and rearranged by his students Anderson and Krathwol (2000) who divide the cognitive domain into six categories: (1) remembering, (2) understanding, (3) applying, (4) analyzing, (5) evaluating, and (6) creating. This is might be what is meant by a proposition saying that language is a symbolic representation which allows children to abstract the world.

Though the categories of intellectual development have different names and roles, one thing is sure that the use of language as the means is inevitable. One cannot remember or recall previous learned information if he/she is not familiar with language used. One will not be able to comprehend the meaning, translation, interpolation, and interpretation of instruction and problems if he/she is not familiar with the language used for instruction. One will not be able to apply a concept in a new situation or unprompted use of an abstraction. One will not be able to apply what was learned in the classroom into novel situations in the work place if he/she has no idea about the language. One will not be able to analyze separate material or concepts into component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. Also, one will not be able to distinguish between facts and inferences unless he/she has the capacity in the language. Making judgments about the value of ideas or materials cannot be

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conducted unless he/she has the capacity in the language. And creating a structure or pattern from diverse elements and to put parts together to form a whole, with emphasis on creating a new meaning or structure cannot be accomplished unless he/she has the capacity in the language.

*4.3 Motherese Theory*

Motherese theory claims that language is acquired by children as the results of interaction between "mothers" and children. Mothers here may mean the real mothers but it may also other adult caretakers undergoing interaction in such a way so that the children with limited linguistic competence and cognitive development can get involved in the interaction in more understandable way. Inspired by Snow, 1995; Snow and Fergusson, 1977, McDonagh and McDonagh (2008) listed a number of characteristics of motherese or caretakers language that make the language is more easily acquired. They (1) are simple and redundant, (2) contain many questions, (3) contain many imperatives, (4) contain few past tenses, (5) contain few coordinating conjunctions, (6) contain disfluencies, and (7) contain higher pitched and exaggerated intonation.

*4.4 Empirical Evidence*

The longitudinal study on language development carried out by Lenneberg (1981) may become empirical evidence of the "truth" of the three theories discussed above. To be able to give description of her subject language development in detail and comprehensively, Lenneberg observed her subject for four years. What she found was interesting and very informative.

For instance, at the end of the first year, the subject replicated identical sound sequences with higher relative frequency of occurrence and words (mamma or dada). At the completion of the second year, he had vocabulary of more than 50 items. He began spontaneously to join vocabulary items into two-word phrases and all phrases appear to be his own creations. At the completion the third year, he had vocabulary of some 1000 words of which about 80% of utterances were intelligible even to strangers. Grammatical complexity of utterances he produces is roughly that of colloquial adult language, although mistakes still occurred. And at the completion of the fourth year, the language he produced was well-established, and if deviations from adult norm occurred, these tended to be more in style than in grammar.

## 5. Encouraging Polyglots in L1, L2 and English

It should be acknowledged that English in Indonesia is not the language which is used as L1. This implies that it is not used as a means of daily communication among most family members at home since the very young age, nor the language which is used in community at large in their daily lives. It is also a fact that English is not an L2, the language which is used in most formal situations such as most government offices, nor the language which is used as medium of instruction in most educational institutions. Rather, English is treated exactly the same as other subject-matter in and within the school system, i.e., using Indonesian language and sometimes native language as the medium of instruction. This happens in almost all levels of education: junior and senior high school, and even in colleges and

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universities. Since English is not used as medium of instruction at Indonesian schools, nor at home, nor in formal situation, it is understandable then that most Indonesian people (learners) become polyglots in their local Language (L1) and Indonesian Language (L2), not their local language and English, nor Indonesian language and English.

The impact of the status of English in Indonesian school system as described above, result in the competency of most Indonesian learners in English is very weak. This can be inferred from the results of some research on the issue. Suyanto (1997), for instance, uncovered high school graduates who have studied English for six years can scarcely read reference books written in English. Mayasari (2009) investigating the ability of the second grade vocational school students in writing descriptive paragraph found unsatisfying results. Whereas Fitriyah et al. (2007) discovered that the subjects she studied mostly made language errors in three categories: (1) interlingual errors from the native language, (2) intralingual errors within the target language, and (3) inaccuracies in measuring and appropriating to the sociolinguistic context of communication.

Of course, the results did not represent the whole situation of the formal teaching and learning English in Indonesian educational institutions. For, it cannot be denied that there were also a number of English language learners who had good competence in the language. Besides, the results of research illustrated above were segmental in the sense that they did not study comprehensive and thorough cases. However, they may justify the claim that formal teaching and learning English in Indonesia do not cause language learners to become polyglots in English and other language(s).

## 6. The 2013 English Curriculum

English curriculum cannot be separated from the national curriculum, the 2013 curriculum, stipulated by Indonesian government. Based on PERMENDIKBUD No. 37 of 2018, one of the formal explanations of the national curriculum, the teaching and learning any subject-matter in and within Indonesian school system should cover four competencies, namely: (1) spiritual attitudes, (2) social attitudes, (3) language knowledge, and (4) language skills.

The first two competencies, i.e., spiritual attitudes and social attitudes, are categorized as the core competencies in the curriculum. Spiritual attitudes are the attitudes related to God the Almighty, the Creator. Of the attitudes expected to grow among Indonesian learners are faithful, obedient, and generous. While social attitudes are the attitudes related to social relationship, such as respecting, understanding, appreciating, and valuing others.

All Indonesian learners should develop these two competencies within themselves. All teachers of subject-matters in and within the school system should help the learners to develop these two competencies. Thus, a biology teacher, a mathematics teacher or an English teacher, for instance, in addition to have responsibility to teach biology, mathematics or English, he/she also has to pay attention to his/her students' spiritual attitudes and social attitudes. In conclusion, all teachers of subject-matters are responsible for their students to develop these two competences: spiritual attitudes

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and social attitudes. All teachers of subject-matters have to integrate these two competencies in their teaching.

*7.1 Language Knowledge*

In the teaching and learning English, Permendikbud No. 37 of 2018, requires all English teachers have to help language learners to be familiar with language knowledge of English covering the understanding of facts, concepts, and procedures based on their curiosity concerning science, technology, arts, culture related to the observed phenomena and events. This knowledge includes identification of social function, texts structure, and language features of every oral and written interactional and transactional text.

*7.2 Language Skills*

Supported by the knowledge of language, as suggested by the Permendikbud above, language learners are supposed to be able to develop their language competencies (skills). Among are the competence of composing oral and written personal interactional and transactional texts and the competence of understanding the meaning of oral and written texts contextually.

The competence of composing oral and written personal interactional and transactional texts here are categorized as productive skills and competence of understanding the meaning of oral and written texts contextually are categorized as receptive skills. The competences that belong to receptive skills are: listening and reading, while the language skills that belong to productive skills are speaking and writing.

Considering the language knowledge the language learners should be familiar with and the skills they should be able to perform, I can say that the goals of teaching and learning English in Indonesia is to help the language learners to be able to communicate in English. Though there are many definitions of communication, for me, it is simply a matter of understanding what other people say and write in English exactly as it is meant, and being understood by other people when he/she says or writes something in English without misunderstanding. If this situation can be achieved, it may be claimed that the language learners have acquired what is suggested by Savignon (in Celce-Murcia, 2001) as "communicative competence".

## 8. Communicative Functions of Language

Having had good communicative competence a polyglot can enjoy communicative functions of a language more than a non-polyglot. Mary Finocchiaro (1989) divides the communicative functions of language into: *personal, interpersonal, directive, referential, met linguistic,* and *imaginative.*

When a language is used by a polyglot to express his/her emotions, needs, thoughts, desires, or attitudes; to clarify or classify ideas it fulfills the function of personal needs in different language. When a language is used a polyglot to establish and maintain good social relations with individuals and groups; to express praise, sympathy, or joy at another's success; to inquire about health; to apologize; to invite, it fulfills the function of interpersonal needs in the language other than his/hers. When a

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language is used by a polyglot to control the behavior of others through advice, warnings, requests, persuasion, suggestions, orders, or discussion it in other language it fulfills the function of directive needs. When a language is used by a polyglot to talk about objects or events in the immediate setting or environment or in the culture; to discuss the present, the past, and the future, in other language than his/hers this function is called referential. When the language is used by a polyglot to talk about language, for example, "What does *polyglot* mean?" it fulfills the function of metalinguistic needs. And when a language is used by a polyglot to use language creatively in rhyming, composing poetry, writing, or speaking it fulfills its imaginative function.

## 9. Conclusion

To end our discussion, allow me to go back to the questions raised at the beginning of this paper: "Why do some people be able to communicate only in one language while some others are able to communicate in two, three, four, even more, different languages?".

In my opinion, since everyone is assumed to have been equipped with LAD, it is very probable that language learners become a polyglot in L1, L2 and English. They have already been polyglots in their L1 (native language) and L2 (Indonesian language). Aided by their experience in learning L2, it is not impossible that they also can include English as the repertoire of their polyglotism. With the LAD he/she possesses it becomes the potential for him/her to acquire any language he/she is exposed to, included English. With that LAD he/she can detect whether the sounds he/she is exposed to accords the sound system of English. With the LAD, he/she will be able to detect and screen unacceptable construction of English syntactical system. And with the LAD he/she has he/she will be able and to detect and fix inappropriate use of lexes based on the lexical system of English.

Other reason that makes me believe that language learners can become polyglots in L1, L2, and English is that the results of research which suggest that the use of one language may become the means of acquiring English more easily. This is strengthened by the confession of the world's top polyglots who state that polyglotism is just a matter of empowering and making use of the potentials the language learners have by maximally focusing on much listening, much speaking, much reading, and much writing in the target language.

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