Young children's

by Teuku Zulfikar

YOUNG CHILDREN'S WORD AWARENESS DEVELOPMENT AT PRESCHOOL

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Abstract

This study describes the children's way of developing their word awareness from their teachers and peers at school. The data were obtained from 30 young children, aged 5-6, of a class in a preschool in Banda Aceh. The instruments used to collect data were observations and documents from teachers' anecdotal records and children's language achievement reports. The observations were conducted for one semester of about 5 months. The results show that the teachers use the motherese register to speak with the children. They speak more slowly, clearly, with a higher pitch, and with exaggerated intonation. Children develop their word awareness from teachers with facilitation from the multimedia, things around them and social environment at the school. These assistances support the children's phonological and semantic awareness by highlighting their teachers as models. Meanwhile, the children's interaction with their peers tends to produce some errors in words usage and pronunciation. The paper further provides discussions on the results.

Keywords: Young Children, Word Awareness, Development, Teachers, Peers, Preschool

INTRODUCTION

Children have enormous complexity in language development during their growth. Based on Regulation of the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (or *Peraturan Pemerintah Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan*) No. 137 (2014, p.2) about Early Childhood Education Standards, Chapter 1, Article 1, Point 2 on the six growth and development aspects of children, it is stated that "… a criterion of children achievement is on growth and development aspects; these comprise religion and moral values, psychomotor, cognitive, language, social-emotional, and art". And so, children's language development is one of the important children's achievements besides the other aspects mentioned in the article.

Language not only grows and develops in children, but it also needs to be stimulated and optimized as a communication tool for children to express wishes, feelings, and needs. According to Genishi (2011), Hoff and Bridges (2008), children mostly learn to comprehend, imitate, and intentionally name everything in their surrounding into words. They may have errors in the development (Rohde & Plaut, 2003) and these errors could be in pronunciation, word order, structure, etc. Therefore, according to them, in the process of language acquisition and development, children need guidance and good environment as one of stimulating factors.

Eliyawati (2005) states that parents, adults, and friends are worthy sources of language development at home, school or society. Moreover, Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia No. 137 (2014, p. 3) about Early Childhood Education Standards, Chapter 1, Article 1, Point 13 on the children's learning sources states that "learning is a process of interaction among students and teachers by involving parents as one of the learning sources in learning and playing activities at preschool or Early Childhood Education (or *Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*) programs". This article reinforces that parents, other adults, and friends are significant factors to improve and develop children's developmental aspects of language. Children always try to learn the rules of their language at an early age through its use and without formal instruction over time. It is the process of memorizing and using words in order to convey their needs, feelings, and emotions (Buzan, 2005). Moreover, they are not only accumulating vocabulary as a part of language proficiency but are also acquiring the skill of 'word awareness' with the integrity of brain functioning (metacognitive), which is known as metalinguistic awareness process of children (Bialystok, Peets & Moreno, 2011, p. 181).

Previous research conducted related to children's word awareness is by Bialystok et al., (2011). They found that metalinguistic awareness is fundamental to children's literacy acquisition and academic achievement. It is a collection of abilities (i.e. word awareness, grammatical awareness, phonological awareness, etc.) rather than a single skill. The main determinant of performance is the productivity of lexical representation for categories (i.e. animal, plants, clothing, etc.) and quick access to those lexical items. Based on their study, word awareness is defined as a single skill which does not only consent to how children accumulate vocabulary and access words and concepts, but also to integrating ways of thinking and cognition in the language input and output. Moreover, sociocultural approaches (i.e. linguistic models) are also included in the process.

A preliminary observation conducted at Latifa Preschool that focused on children aged between 4 and 6 years old showed the following results. Firstly, there are some children who had problems in their language development and this was shown when they interacted with their peers and teachers at the school. Secondly, children shared new words every day with each other without relying on the meaning from the teachers. Thirdly, children received new words from the teachers through singing, storytelling, discussing, demonstrating things and doing school activities. While acquiring words and meaning, it was apparent that they needed guidance to develop the language aspects from teachers so the new words being acquired are not incorrectly defined. Therefore, children should be expected to have good language development by having word awareness through their linguistic models, such as peers and adults as the significance sources. Based on the problems and the theories of interference above, this study is concerned with first language acquisition in children's word awareness.

Based on the observation above, we are also interested to investigate children's metalinguistic awareness, focusing on word awareness from peers and adults at Latifa Preschool, Banda Aceh, Indonesia. We believe that it is of great importance to study children's word awareness because once the process and progress are explored, it can assist teachers to exert their teaching to reach children's learning potentials.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language and Children

Language is a system of sounds, symbols or gestures to communicate with others based on a set of agreed rules (Doherty & Hughes, 2009; Santrock, 2005; Susanto, 2011). Likewise, language is used by children to interpret their experiences into symbols and communicate them with others (Susanto, 2011). The childhood years are the major development of language milestones. Doherty and Hughes (2009) state that only in a few years, approximately all children show themselves as competent communicators. They acquire and learn to speak as they go through their childhood years (Buzan, 2005; Doherty & Hughes, 2009).

Language is important to raise and develop children's cognitive development. As its purpose is for communication, and thus it is a tool in which the process of thinking begins (Susanto, 2011). For example, as communication is the process in which information is transmitted and received verbally or auditory, it is impossible to do it without language. It also allows speakers to interact with others, to express their personal wishes, to help them organize their thinking, actions, express emotions, and even alter emotional states (Doherty & Hughes, 2009; Rachmawati & Kurniati, 2010; Santrock, 2005).

First Language Acquisition

First language acquisition is a rapid process, which refers to children's natural acquisition of language they hear from birth (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011). It is different from a second language and a foreign language that begin later and involve formal instructions (Yusuf, 2009). Hoff (2006) explained that first language acquisition is a stout process. Every child is exposed to different kind of cultures in the early language experiences provided to them, thus all normal children in any environment learn to talk. When they do, their comprehension abilities also develop along with questions in their mind. It happens in advance of their productive speech. Starting from newborn infants, to when they become young children who comment, question, state and express their ideas in their first language or mother tongue. They ask people around them to name everything they see (noun) to what people do (verb), and then why they become as what they are. All words are derived from people as the environment for them learn to talk.

Children's Language Development

Not every child goes through similar experiences in their development of speech and language skills. However, all normal children follow a natural progression in mastering skills of language. As with learning to walk, learning to talk to acquire language skills requires time for development and practice in everyday situations. There are children with individual differences concerning the rate at which children acquire language, and therefore children possess the language skills when they enter school (Hoff, 2006). At school, they often try to understand the meanings that others convey. In this case, the point of learning a language and social interaction is not to master rules but to try to make connections with friends and teachers to make sense of experiences (Genishi, 2011). Psychologically, the first year of age appears to be critical periods for children's speech and language development when the brain is best able to

absorb language (Susanto, 2011). If these critical periods are allowed to pass without exposure to the language, it will be more difficult to learn (Krashen, 1982).

Word Awareness
Word awareness is a skill developed during first language acquisition. According to Bialystok et al. (2011), word awareness is one of the metalinguistic skills that has two components as language proficiency and executive control. Moore (2012) adds that this skill is important in the process of first language acquisition in monitoring and attending linguistic input and output (words) consciously. For example, there can be one word that has different meanings based on different semiotic experiences of the children and their exposure to discourse modes whether they aid or hinder. She also adds that the social class of children's families affects variants of words used and the ability to consciously attend to language. Hence, one beneficial activity to develop such metalinguistic skills is classroom interaction (discussion, dialogue, and instructional activity). Then there is also the inclusion of the sociocultural approaches (linguistic models) in the core of messages conveyed by the language. Again, language is defined as the neurodevelopment ability to use and combine words as to communication (Doman, 1999); and so, in relation to word awareness, children first get the meaning of words to conduct communication in oral speech.

Linguistic Models
Hudson (1980) states that there are three linguistic models for children to trail, i.e. parents, peers, and adults. The child's language model is his parents until he is 3 or 4 years old, then his peers replace his parents until he is about 13, when he (presumably) starts looking to the adult world towards which he is moving. However, many children do take their peers rather than their parents as a model (Hudson, 1980). To nurture language development, parents, teachers, caregivers, and guardians need to know and remember that language in the great majority of individuals develops robustly. Teachers, at that juncture, can help sustain natural language development by providing the environment full of language development opportunities in the school ground.

METHOD
This research uses a qualitative approach. MacNaughton and Williams (2004) state that it uses exploration and interpretation types in the educational setting of the classroom to observe and analyze in a more open-ended way and teachers often make the observation that reflects classroom life. This research was conducted to describe the preschool children's way of developing their word awareness from their teachers and peers at Latifa Preschool, Banda Aceh, Indonesia. When talking about words awareness, typically there are three components to this matter, they are sound, meaning and syllable. Nevertheless, due to the limited time available for this study, we only focus on the sounds of new words, and the way children obtain the meaning of the words.

A number of 30 young children, aged 5-6, of a kindergarten class, B1, were observed for 6 months during their school hours for this research. Two teachers who taught the class were also observed on the teaching and learning process of new words to the children. The researchers took note of the children's interaction with the teachers and peers as well as their behavior toward the words they use to communicate. The first

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researcher was directly involved and spent time during the observations in the classroom. We also collected data through the anecdotal records and language achievement reports of each student. The teachers evaluated each child thoroughly, and this kind of assessment is one of the authentic assessments in every semester and the results were informed and consulted with each child's parents. The purpose of collecting these documents was to study the children's language improvement and development based on the indicators according to the curriculum for Grade B of kindergarten.

In analyzing data from observation, the researcher followed the stages of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which comprise: data reduction, data display, and conclusion. In data reduction, the content of the children's noted communication was rechecked and categorized into the following themes: introducing new words, children's interaction with teachers and children's interaction with peers. In data display, examples from data were chosen to be used for the further elaboration of the children's word awareness. Then, these data were elaborated and concluded. Meanwhile, in analyzing data obtained from the anecdotal records and language achievement reports, the researcher's used a checklist as shown in Table 1, Children Development Indicators aged 5 to 6, adopted and translated from Peraturan Pemerintah Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan No. 137 (2014).

Table 1. Children development indicators aged 5 to 6

Aspects of language development	Indicators	BM (*Belum Muncul or not yet developed*)	MM (*Mulai Muncul or start to develop*	BSH (*Berkembang Sesuai Harapan or develop as expected*)	BSB (*Berkembang Sangat Baik or develop very well*)
	Level of children's language development aged 5-6				
a. Receptive language	1. Understanding several requests simultaneously. 2. Repeating a more complex sentence. 3. Understanding the rules in a game. 4. Being happy and understanding a simple reading.				
b. Expressive language	1. Answering a complex question. 2. Saying a group of pictures with words of similar sounds. 3. Oral communication,				

have the
vocabulary and
knowing symbols
for reading and
writing
preparation, and
calculation.
4. Arranging
simple sentence in
a complex
structure (subject-
verb-
complement).
5. Having enough
vocabulary to
express ideas with
others.
6. Re-telling parts
of stories/myth
that they have
listened to before.
7. Understanding
the concepts
presented in
storybooks.

In the checklist, the researchers marked (v) in each indicator for each child based on their anecdotal records and language achievement reports. BSH indicates develop as expected and BSB means develop very well. Both are characterized by a child consistently demonstrating the positive achievement ability and beyond the characteristic stature of an indicator for his/her age (Dirjen PAUD, 2014). To sum up the results, the researchers used a single percentage formula to calculate the children's language achievement. To calculate the percentage of the answer frequency, the same formula was used:

$$P=F/n \times 100\%$$

From the formula, P refers to the percentage, F is the frequency of children's language achievement, n is the total number of samples and 100% is the constant value.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Observation
Introducing New Words

Before the teaching-learning process starts every school day, the teachers set the class into a very comfortable setting by arranging the chairs into groups, preparing tools and materials to study. In the teachers' teaching and learning process, children receive many new words from their teachers daily. To elaborate on the meaning of new words to the children, they always used gestures, tones, related media and illustrations. The media used are such as pictures, real objects, books on the topics, miniatures/toys, and even videos through the laptop or the projector. The media are to not only make the

class situation interesting but also to stimulate the children to interact and communicate using the words. The teachers used the motherese register to talk to the children. In this style, they spoke more slowly, clearly, and at a higher pitch with exaggerated intonation.

In introducing new words, the teachers apply the process of recasting, expanding and labeling. In a recasting, this is when after a child heard a new word, the teacher modifies it to its other synonyms. For example, the words *bulan puasa* [fasting month] is for *Ramadhan, jalan-jalan* [having a stroll] is for *rekreasi* [recreation/pastime], and *mobil keruk* [dredge car] is for *beko* [backhoe]. In expanding, this is when the teachers expand the meaning of the new word. For example, *mobil besar korek tanah* [a big car to dig the ground] is for *beko* [backhoe]. Finally, labeling is to identify the objects. Here, the teacher showed a toy backhoe and asked the child to identify it and say its name.

Children's Interaction with Teachers

In introducing new words, this is also a way for the teachers to build their interaction with the children. These interactions are in the form of discussion, group work, playing, and micro dramatic play. For example, the teachers introduced the word *delman* [a traditional vehicle or ground transportation equipment] through dramatic art and display. This activity was also followed along with the traditional music of *Naik Delman Istimewa* [riding a special *delman*] to raise their emotional sense of the word. She continued to expand the meaning of the word by asking the children's experiences with the word if any. An excerpt of interaction in this activity is shown in E1 (E refers to an excerpt from data):

E1 Teacher   : *"Siapa pernah naik delman?"* [Who has ridden a *delman* before?]
    Child 1   : *"Bu, kami pernah naik delman di Taman Sari".* [Miss, we (i.e. I) have ridden a *delman* in Taman Sari (the city's public park)]
    Teacher   : *"Oh ya? Dengan siapa naiknya?"* [Really? With whom?]
    Child 1   : *"Dengan nenek sama mama kami…"* [with my grandmother and mother…]

The excerpt in E1 shows that the teacher tried to reflect the word through the children's experience of the word. This is to help them memorize the word better when they know its meaning in context. Moreover, the teachers also introduced new words to the children through stories. An excerpt from data is as follows:

E2 Teacher   : *"Ada seorang anak namanya Deni. Deni udah pernah meaniki semua alat-alat atau kendaraan yang bisa membawanya pergi ke suatu tempat, baik jauh maupun dekat, apakah melewati jalanan, melewati air laut maupun melewati langit atau udara. Nah, alat-alat yang Deni naik itu namanya alat transportasi. Transportasi. Ayo, coba apa namanya sayang?"* [There was a boy named Deni. He has ridden all types of vehicles that can take him to places, far and near, through air or land. Now, these vehicles that Deni rode are called transportation. Transportation. Come on, what are they called again, dear?]
    Children   : *"Alat transportasi."* [Transportation]
    Teacher   : *"Bagus sekali!"* [Excellent]

From E2, it shows how the teacher used a simple story to introduce new vocabulary to the children. She gave a long definition using illustrations to make them easy to understand the new word. From observation, the children's interaction with the teachers were keen; the children were enthusiastic to learn, know and use the new words taught by the teachers. They also tried to give responses by asking, practicing and identifying the new words if they found objects associating to it by pointing out to the objects and repeating the new word.

Moreover, children at school also learned different words with similar meanings but used in different contexts (Radford et al., 2009; Nation, 2001). For example, the word *'paruh'* (beak) is for fowls or birds; the word *'belalai'* (trunk) functions as a snout for the elephant, the word *'pasien'* (patient) for a sick human who needs medical help, etc. The children were assisted by their teachers by using different media to help them differ the criteria, function and benefit referred to by the word.

Therefore, in the process, the teachers guided the children in knowing and understanding the meaning of the new words (Hoff & Bridges, 2008; Radford et al., 2009). After pronouncing and identifying some new words introduced by the teachers, they were asked to repeat the words in similar or different contexts, such as repeating the words after the teachers, singing them in songs, answering them in questions, and pointing to objects and activities for familiarization of the words. This step of repeated opportunities is to make retrievals of the word and meaning (Nation, 2001).

Children's Interaction with Peers

New words were also learned from peers. However, the language used between the children and their peers was simpler and even sometimes had mistakes, such as in pronunciation in incorrect word choice. These mistakes were resolved if the teachers happen to hear their conversation. The teachers would provide them with the correct way of saying the word. This situation is such as in the following excerpt.

E3 Child 1 : *"Farah ganteng!"* [Farah (i.e. a girl) is handsome!]
Child 2 : *"Cantik eee…bukan ganteng!"* [(She is) beautiful…not handsome!]
Child 1 : *"Sama aja kan?"* [Isn't the same?]
Child 2 : *"Gaaakkk…kalau perempuan cantik, kalau laki-laki ganteng!"* [Nooo…a girl is beautiful, a boy is handsome!]
Child 1 : *"Ya udah! Keren aja!"* [Fine! (She is) cool, then!]

In E3, we can see that the children in the conversation were learning from each other. Child 1 actually wanted to praise her friend, who is a girl, of her beautiful face, but used the word *ganteng* (handsome) for her, instead. Child 2 corrected and informed her of her mistakes. Despite feeling irritated, Child 1 had learned of her mistakes in the use of the word *ganteng* that did not suit her context of use.

In E4, this is a situation where a teacher intervenes a conversation between two children to make a correction on a word used by one of the children.

E4 Child 1 : *"Kami ada kelang baru"*. [We (i.e. I) have a new bracelet (mispronounced)].
Child 2 : *"Kelang kami juga ada tapi warna biru"*. [We (i.e. I) also have a

		bracelet but the color is blue]
Teacher	:	(overhears their conversation) *"Wah cantik sekali gelangnya"*. [Wow your bracelet is beautiful (corrected the child's pronunciation]
Child 1	:	*"Kelang kami merah"*. [My bracelet is red]
Teacher	:	*"Oh gelang merah!"* (stressed the word in focus) [Oh, a red bracelet!"]
Child 1	:	*"Iya, gelang. Gelang"*. [Yes, bracelet. Bracelet (realized her mispronunciation and corrected it]
Teacher	:	*"Pandainya!"* [You are so smart!]

In E4, the teacher indirectly corrected the child's mispronunciation by involving herself in the children's conversation. Many times, children converse with each and other and produced mistakes in their use of words. This continues until a teacher or another peer who knows the correct form informs them of the correct way of saying it. There were also times when children get into a dispute over a word that they both actually do not know, and in this case, they would ask their teacher for the correct way of saying it.

It was also observed that the children were slower in monitoring function words than content words, such as the word *'kami'* (we) for *'saya'* (I/me); and this is common for children (Hahne et al., 2004). It occurred not only in the interaction with the teachers but also with peers or friends. They will eventually improve and correct these repeated mistakes as they develop and expand their social interactions.

Furthermore, it was observed that the children developed their word awareness from the teachers more than from their peers. Perhaps this is because the teachers gave better attention and efforts to encourage their language use with more vocabulary. In imitating new words, children are great imitators (Doherty & Hughes, 2009; Santrock, 2005); they imitated every new word they get from the teachers and peers to develop their language usage.

Documentation

Based on the evaluation of the children's language development through each child's anecdotal records and language achievement reports, we found different and variant results for each child. Firstly, based on the language skills of understanding and expression, each category has 4 and 7 indicators. For understanding, 79.2% of children developed as expected (*berkembang sesuai harapan* or BSH), 19.2% of children began to develop (*mulai muncul* or MM), and the other 1.6% did not yet develop their vocabulary during the semester. For expressing language skill, it seemed that 52.9% of children developed as expected (*berkembang sesuai harapan* or BSH), 43.8% of children began to develop (*mulai muncul* or MM), and the others 3.3% had not yet developed (*belum muncul* or BM). This data implies that more than half of the children in class B1 have developed as expected (*berkembang sesuai harapan* or BSH). In accordance to Dirjen PAUD (2014, p. 22), "the criteria begin to develop (*mulai muncul* or MM) is included in the development criteria for children".

Overall, the children's language development was 62.4% of children who developed as expected (*berkembang sesuai harapan* or BSH), 34.8% of children who began to develop (*mulai muncul* or MM), and 2.7% had not yet developed (*belum muncul* or BM). The summary is in Table 2.

Table 2. The percentage of children language development group b-1

No.	Indicator	Children's Language Development			
		BM	MM	BSH	BSB
1	Part A				
	Indicator 1	0	1	29	0
	Indicator 2	1	12	17	0
	Indicator 3	0	1	29	0
	Indicator 4	1	9	20	0
2	Part B				
	Indicator 1	1	3	26	0
	Indicator 2	1	1	28	0
	Indicator 3	0	15	15	0
	Indicator 4	1	7	22	0
	Indicator 5	1	28	1	0
	Indicator 6	1	10	19	0
	Indicator 7	2	28	0	0
	Total	9	115	206	0
	Percentage (%)	2.7	34.8	62.4	0.0

In communication with the children, preschool teachers always used the motherese register to speak with children. They spoke more slowly, clearly, at a higher pitch, and with exaggerated intonation (Doherty & Hughes, 2009; Hoff, 2006; Santrock, 2005; Susanto, 2011). Children's ways of speaking and interacting are different from adults (Hahne et al., 2004). Therefore, in teaching new words to children, teachers must give good references and explanation about the words and their meaning by explaining directly or indirectly the criteria and function of the words by using various media.

CONCLUSION

In general, the results of the study imply that the children's language development in Grade B1 of Latifa Preschool were 62.4% developed as expected (*berkembang sesuai harapan* or BSH), 34.8% began to develop (*mulai muncul* or MM), and 2.7% had not yet developed (*belum muncul* or BM). Word awareness is one of the meta skills that does not only help children know, accumulate, use words or vocabulary, but also develop efficient access to words and concepts. During the early childhood education, i.e. preschool or kindergarten, children intensely develop their word awareness from the teachers (adults) facilitated with various media (pictures, books, miniatures, toys, songs, games, and videos), references and explanation they needed in order to expand their vocabulary use.

The preschool teachers further used the motherese register to speak with the children. They spoke more slowly, clearly, at a higher pitch, and with exaggerated intonation. Children also develop their word awareness from friends (peers), despite mistakes in word choice and pronunciation, thus they are expected to improve as the children's social interaction develops. Increasing vocabulary storage helps them to better interact with other people to express their needs, requests, willingness, and emotion.

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