CHAPTER I

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1.1 Background of the Study

Development of oral language is one of the child's most natural and impressive accomplishments. All children learn their language at an early age through use and without formal instruction. It implies that one source for learning must be innate. According to Chomsky a child possesses a set of innate principles which guide language processing (Ellis, 1986: 14). This enables children to work through linguistic rules on their own. As human beings have an innate gift, they are capable of figuring out the rules of the language used in their environment. Thus, environment is also a significant factor in helping and assisting children learn a language. Children learn a specific variety of language that the important people around them speak (parents, caretakers, grandparents). Children do not, however, learn only by imitating those around them. As a child is able to work through linguistic rules on his own, a child may come up with a sentence that adults will never use such as, "I taked a bath at seven," or "I brush my teethes". Children eventually learn the correct forms, took and teeth, as they sort out for themselves the exceptions to the rules of English syntax.

However, children are born not just to speak but also to interact socially. Even before they are able to use words, they use cries and gestures to convey meaning. In addition, they often understand the meaning that others convey. The point of learning language and interacting socially, then, is not to master rules but

to make connections with other people and to make sense of experiences (Wells, 1986). In other words, language occurs through an interaction among genes (which hold tendencies to communicate and be sociable), environment, and the child's own thinking.

Oral language, the complex system that relates sounds to meaning, is made up of three components: the phonological, semantic, and syntactic. Speakers of a language constantly use these three components of language together, usually in social situations. However, the use of these three components in social situation will be complete with the existence of the fourth component, i.e. pragmatics which deals with rules of language use. Pragmatic rules are part of our communicative competence, our ability to speak appropriately in different situations. For example, in a conversational way at home and in a more formal way at a job interview. Young children need to learn the different ways of speaking to their parents at home and to their teachers at school where, for example, teachers often ask rhetorical questions. Learning pragmatic rules is as important as learning the rules of the other three components of language, since people are perceived and judged based on both what they say and when to say it.

A child may pronounce words clearly, have a large vocabulary, use long and complex sentences, but still have a communication problem if he or she has not mastered the rules for appropriate social language or pragmatics. The following example is to illustrate that learning how to use language appropriately in social situation is as important as learning the other three components of oral language (phonology, semantic, and syntax). The writer's family once had a guest.

He was the classmate of the writer's husband in college. The writer's son, Ignas, never met him before. As the guest and the writer's husband were eating the snack in the living room, then Ignas approached the guest and said, "Kalau ma'em nggak boleh bunyi. Nggak boleh". The writer's embarrassment made it difficult for her to believe that her child did not intend to be rude. Rather, her child might have a problem of knowing how to use language appropriately in social situations.

In the above example, the writer's son told the guest what to do. Ignas followed the conversational rules of taking turns and did not do interruption. However, he did not adapt language to the speaking situation. Perhaps he did not know that certain topics are socially inappropriate and that it is usually improper for children to tell a guest what to do.

The pragmatic skills in children manifest in various ways. It can be saying appropriate or related things during conversations, following the rules of taking turns, making requests, or telling stories in an organized way. For example, parents know how frustrating it can be to ask a young child, "What did you do today?" and hear the response, "Nothing." Maybe the child can make requests, asking questions and greet people politely, but has trouble or difficulties organizing language to talk about what happened in the past. During conversation a child may appear to pull topics out of the air, may not use statements that signal a change in topic, or may not follow the rules of taking turns. Back to the example above, it is obvious then that even a very young child needs to master the rules for appropriate social language or pragmatics. A child needs to know how to take

turn, talk on topics which are socially appropriate, or ask question politely. Therefore, acquiring pragmatic skills is absolutely necessary.

In the light of the above explanation, the writer is inspired to carry out a study on pragmatic skills mastery in children. Knowing how important it is for a child to master the rules of language use as early as possible and the seeing the scarcity of studies focused on children's pragmatic skills performance, the writer set out to conduct a study on "Pragmatic Skills Performance of an Indonesian Child". According to Ninio and Snow (1996), pragmatic skills cover, among others, the conversational skills and communicative acts. In line with them, this study focuses on the description of those two skills, conversational skills and communicative acts, or speech acts to use Searl's term (1969), which are performed by an Indonesian child. The reason of choosing conversational skills and communicative acts is based upon the fact that these two accomplishments are related in some ways rather than being separate topics. Each provides the context for the development of the other one. For example, conversation interactions provide an opportunity for children to acquire their first conventional speech acts, but the continued development of conversational skills requires that children acquire more sophisticated speech acts like asking and responding to questions (Ninio and Snow, 1996: 14). Therefore these two accomplishments are intertwined and mutually dependent.

1.2 Statement of the Problems

The background of the study discussed above leads to the following research problems:

(1) What conversational skills can an Indonesian child perform?

(2) What communicative acts can an Indonesian child perform?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

In the light of the research problems, the study is intended to the fulfillment of the following objectives:

1. providing a description of the conversational skills perfor d by the subject.

2. providing a description of the communicative acts performed by the subject.

1.4 Significance of the Study

In view of the fact that there is still a lack of pragmatic stud specially the ones that focus on pragmatic skills performance, the finding of the study are expected to give contribution to the theoretical development of pragmatic studies. Moreover, it gives practical benefits to the society especially parents and teachers.

This study is theoretically beneficial in enriching the issue of pragmatic studies which, in fact, are rarely found. In the case of pragmatic skills performance, the findings of the study will present facts that will strengthen the existing theories proposed by pragmatic experts and, on the other hand, present

new facts that might bring different perspectives on pragmatic skills performance in children.

Society, in this case parents and teachers can also put the findings of this study into practical uses for the sake of the improvement of children's language performance especially in acquiring pragmatic skills. For parents, the findings of study can give a clear and authentic example of pragmatic skills performance in children in which it can give feedback to their own children's pragmatic skills development. This is absolutely necessary to be noticed by parents in order to give appropriate stimulus in assisting and encouraging their children to master the rules of language use and adapt them to the speaking situation. For teachers, especially young learners' teachers, this study will contribute some ways of establishing pragmatic skills in classroom setting. Using language for different purposes - such as greeting, requesting, informing, and asking – and following rules for conversations and narratives – such as taking turns in conversation, rephrasing when misunderstood, and telling stories – can be taught at school. As children are stimulated to the rules of language use both at home with their parents, brothers, sisters, and peers, and at school with their teachers and classmates constantly, then it will arouse children's ability to speak appropriately in different situations.

1.5 Scope and Limitation

Pragmatic skills are part of communication competence and deal with the ability to speak appropriately in different situations; therefore the source of

data of this study is the subject's spoken discourse. This includes the subject's conversations with his parents, aunts, and caretaker at home, and with his classmates at school.

The subject of the study is a male child, Ignatius Refian Mahendra. He was born on October 21st, 1999 and is the only child of a middle class family. The subject was three years and four months old when the data collection started.

As for the data, the pragmatic skills namely the conversational skills and the communicative acts found in the conversations are the main focus of the discussion. The subject's utterances are analyzed into account for describing his pragmatic skills performance. Nevertheless, not all data were taken in naturalistic setting. In some cases where the child could have performed some acts, certain communicative contexts were deliberately created to elicit the intended responses from the subject. The stimuli in those contexts were given in such a subtle way that the subject was not aware that his acts were actually being elicited.

Besides, time constraints did not allow the writer to conduct a longitudinal study which requires quite a long time to collect the data. In this study, the data collection was conducted within six months, i.e when the subject was three years and four months old and ended when the subject was three years and ten months old. Recording and note keeping waere done in collecting the data which was carried out at two different places, i.e. at home or at any place when the subject was with his parents and at school when the subject was with his classmates. The observation which took place at home was conducted everyday without any time limitation. The observation which took place at school was

conducted three times a week (every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday). It was conducred for more or less 30 minutes during the playtime and mealtime.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

This study is based upon the theory of language acquisition that include the mentalist, behaviorist, and cognitive perspectives, the theories of pragmatics, pragmatic development, and pragmatic skills that include the theories of conversational skills and communicative acts.

1.5.1   Language Acquisition

There are several theoretical approaches to explain how children learn to speak and understand language. It is most likely that no one theory can explain the entire language acquisition process. However, important insights can be gained by examining several theoretical approaches i.e. the mentalist or nativist theory, behaviorist or learning theory, and cognitive theory.

The term nativist is derived from the fundamental assertion that language performance is innately determined, that we are born with a built-in device of some kind that predisposes us language performance, resulting in the construction of an internalized system of language (Brown, 1987: 19). Nativist theorists rely heavily on theories of mind and special abstract mental mechanisms such as a postulated language performance device (LAD) (Chomsky in Gleason and Ratner, 1993: 379). This LAD is to reconcile rapid and successful language performance with deficiencies in data to which the child is exposed to. According to Chomsky, LAD makes it possible for children to attend to the language that the

adults around them speak, make hypotheses about how it works, and derive an appropriate grammar.

The behaviorists claim that language is acquired according to the general laws of learning and is similar to any other learned behavior (Gleason and Ratner, 1993: 381). Behaviorist theory considers effective language behavior to be the production of correct responses to stimuli. If a particular response is reinforced, it then becomes habitual or conditional. Thus children produce linguistic responses that are reinforced.

Cognitive theorists believe that language is just one aspect of human cognition (Piaget in Gleason and Ratner, 1994: 384). According to Piaget and his followers, infants must learn about the world around them, which they do through acrive experiemntation and construction. From Piaget's perspective, lamguage is mapped into an individual's set of prior cognitive knowledge.

1.5.2   Pragmatics

According to Bachman, pragmatic competence is part of language competence (1990: 87). The importance of pragmatics in the recent communicative competence may not be underestimated as pragmatics constraints on language production and interpretation may be loosely thought of as the effect of context on strings of linguistic events. Pragmatic conventions of language are sometimes difficult to learn because of the disparity between language forms and functions. The performance of vocabulary, grammar rules, discourse rules, and other organizational competencies results in nothing if the learner cannot use

those forms for the functional purpose of transmitting and receiving thoughts, ideas, and feelings between speaker and hearer. While forms are the outward manifestation of language, functions are the realization of those forms (Brown, 1993: 231).

1.5.3 Pragmatic Development

According to Ninio and Snow (1996: 4) pragmatic development is concerned with how children acquire the knowledge necessary for the appropriate, effective, rule-governed employment of speech in interpersonal situations. This apparently simple definition leads to a considerable complexity as children have to learn how to be able to use language appropriately and politely in order to be well-accepted by the society. According Ninio and Snow, pragmatic development include, among others, the development of conversational skills and the performance of communicative acts such as to ask questions, to request, to greet, and to refuse (1996: 5-11).

1.5.5 Pragmatic Skills

According to Ninio and Snow (1996) pragmatic skills, among others, include the conversational skills and communicative acts. The conversational skills has a number of components, such as turn-taking that includes back channel, adjacency pair, TRP, latching, and overlap, topic relatedness, topic selection, and topic maintenance. Whereas the communicative acts, according to Ninio and Snow, cover the following categories: Directives and Responses, Speech

Elicitation and Responses, Commitments and Responses, Declaration and Responses, Markings and Responses, Statement and Responses, Questions and Responses, Evaluations, and Demands for Clarifications (1996: 37-38).

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

Before proceeding to further discussion, the writer would like to clarify some key terms applied in this study in order to avoid misinterpretation.

1. Pragmatics, according to Caroline Bowen, (1998) is the area of language function that embraces the use of language in social context (knowing what to say, how to say it, when to say it, and how to 'be' with other people).

2. Pragmatic development is concerned with how children acquire the knowledge necessary for the appropriate, effective, rule-governed employment of speech in interpersonal situations (Ninio and Snow, 1996: 4).

3. Conversational skills is the ability to follow conversational rules that govern turn-taking which include overlapping, backchannel, TRP (Transitional Relevance Place), adjacency pair, and latching, topic relatedness, and topic selection and topic maintenance.

4. Communicative acts are illocutionary speech acts, such as to make statements, to ask questions, to request, to greet, to refuse, to thank, to express sympathy, and so on.

1.7. Organization of the Study

The study consists of five chapters. The first chapter deals with the introduction which includes the background of the study, the statement of the problems, the objective of the study, the significance of the study, the scope and limitation of the study, the definition of the key terms, and the organization of the study. Chapter II concerns with the review of the related literature which consists of the related theories and the related study. The methodology used in the writer's study is discussed in chapter III. Chapter IV contains the analysis of the data, the findings as well as the discussion of the findings. The last chapter is the conclusion of the study and pedagogical implication of the study.