

## SYNTACTIC AWARENESS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD AGED 5-6: A CASE OF SENTENCE STRUCTURE

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### ABSTRACT

*This study seeks to examine syntactic awareness in early childhood aged 5-6 by using word-order correction test. The tests consisted of two separate kinds of sentences; active sentences and passive sentences. Then, the students were tested through two media; picture and flash card. The data used in the present study were gathered from forty-two students in two kindergartens in Bandung. This study employs descriptive qualitative approach and was collected in two ways: 1) visual test and 2) observation during the execution by using recorders. This study reveals that syntactic awareness has emerged among kindergarten students. However, since the test consists of active and passive sentence tests, the finding shows different results. In active sentence test, 85.91% students can identify wrong sentences, and 67.47% students can correct the jumbled sentence. Meanwhile, in passive sentence test, 88.10% students can identify wrong sentences, and 46.23% students can correct the jumbled sentence. Some of the students can identify which sentence is wrong, but they confuse how to put the words in the right order. Then, the students who are not taught to read and write by the teacher (Second Kindergarten) acquired higher score, and the percentage shows that 73.61% of the students could answer the tasks correctly. Meanwhile, the students who are taught to read and write by the teacher (First kindergarten) acquired lower score and 70, 24% of the students could answer the tasks correctly. The finding reveals that: 1) Correction test is more difficult than identification test, 2) Passive sentences are more difficult than active sentences, and 3) There is no significant difference between students who are taught to read and write by the teacher with the students who are not taught at all.*

Keywords: *Syntactic Awareness, Active Sentence, Passive Sentence, Kindergarten Students, Flash Cards*

### INTRODUCTION

The period in which children start to enter their first formal school, such as kindergarten is interesting to be investigated. Kindergarten is expected to help students develop their potentials in acquiring language skills. Language skills will help the children to understand words, sentences, and the relationship between spoken and written language (Karmila, 2012). Theoretically, by age five, children essentially master the sound and grammatical system of their language and acquire thousands of words (Hoff, 2009). Hoff (2009) also mentions that when children gradually master the grammar of a language, they become able to produce increasingly long and grammatically complete utterances. The first five years of life are critically important for the development of language.

Language development becomes an important component, especially for children in early childhood. Therefore, it is important for them to acquire reading or writing skills. According to Gracia (in Silviany, 2016:1), children's language development is characterized by the mastery of sound elements (phonological), word structures (morphology), and sentence structures (syntax). If children have acquired these three components, then the target of future success will be achieved. Even so, in this study syntactic awareness of children aged five to six has its concerns. The focuses on measuring syntactic awareness are on the sentence level which requires the language user to manipulate the grammatical well-formedness and syntactic structure of sentences (Tong, Deacon, & Chain, 2014).

Syntactic awareness is a part of metalinguistic skills and deals with the awareness of sentence structure. As Cain (2007) mentions that syntactic awareness concerns with the ability of people (children) in considering the structure rather than the meanings of the sentence: it may help the students' ability in detecting and correcting word recognition errors. Moreover, Bowey (1986) mentions that syntactic awareness may improve their comprehension in monitoring abilities. Then, Tunmer (1987) adds that syntactic awareness develops the child's ability to reflect and to manipulate aspects of the internal grammatical structure of sentences. Therefore, syntactic awareness may be the most promising candidate as an additional measure of metalinguistic awareness and more research on this measure is needed (McGuinness, 2005).

Syntactic awareness refers to the child's ability of the internal grammatical structure of sentences (Genc, 2013). Syntactic awareness measures children's ability in identifying the correct and incorrect grammatical constructions, such as the grammaticality judgment task. Davidson, Raschke, and Pervez (2010) on their study mention that syntactic awareness is often measured by asking children to assess the

form and the grammar of utterances. Meanwhile, previously, Bowey's (1986) study mentioned that syntactic awareness is assessed by examining children's response to a grammatically deviant sentence in an error correction task. The children would hear a sentence that consist a 'mistake' so that they sounded 'wrong' and were asked to fix the sentence. Therefore, syntactic awareness is children's ability in identifying and correcting sentence structure. It also called as the conscious ability to manipulate or judge word-order within the context of a sentence based on the grammatical rules. Moreover, syntactic awareness mostly relates by children's reading ability. A number of words that are understood by the children may influence their ability in constructing sentence and also the ability to comprehend what they read. However, some of previous studies mention that syntactic ability does not predict reading comprehension. The differences in research findings related to syntactic abilities and reading ability may be influenced due to various factors. Therefore, further studies are necessary.

Some previous studies have discussed syntactic awareness in early childhood in English form. For example, syntactic awareness has been included in Davidson, Rasche and Pervez's (2010) studies investigating 3 – 5 year old bilingual children. The study shows that there are no significant differences appeared in monolingual and bilingual children's ability to detect grammatically correct sentences. Another study, Plaza (2001) examined two metalinguistic skills; syntactic awareness and phonological awareness. The study was performed longitudinally from kindergarten to grade one. In the study, Plaza (2001) also showed the connection between syntax and phonology. The result showed that the kindergarten children who exhibited early syntactic skills and syllable processing made particularly significant progress in consonant identification after one year of reading instruction. Those studies indicate the significance of the children's language features at bases for their future language development.

As a way to identify children literature development, some relevant studies have been conducted in Indonesia. The findings of those studies only include measurement of children's syntactic awareness. For example, Impuni (2012) measured syntactic awareness to children aged 5 by retelling stories. The result shows that the children produced different complex and compound sentences. Meanwhile, Komara (2016) focused on syntactic structures in Indonesian active sentences (intransitive, transitive, ditransitive, and semi-transitive) and assessed 19 preschool students to identify and correct jumbled sentences through audiovisual. He found that the students acquired high results all over and revealed that there was no difference between the visual identification and audio correction. Therefore, he concluded that preschool students have developed their syntactic awareness. Thus, this study adds to the existing literature by investigating the syntactic awareness of young children in Indonesian context, more specifically looking into children's awareness with active and passive sentence forms. This study only focuses on children aged 5-6 at two kindergartens: Calistung kindergarten and Non-Calistung kindergarten.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study employed a descriptive quantitative in collecting and analyzing the data. As Cresswell (2003) mentions that a quantitative approach employs strategies of inquiry such as experiments and surveys, and collects data on instruments that yield statistical data. Meanwhile, descriptive method helps the writer to provide description of reality as objective as possible (Lans and Van der Voordt, 2002). Additionally, William (2007, as cited in Nurdiansyah, 2016) mentions that descriptive approach is also aimed to identify the relation between attributes and variables on the phenomenon in question without manipulating the samples.

The present study was conducted at two kindergartens located in Bandung. The total numbers of students were 42 students. The two Kindergartens were selected based on activities that are implemented by the teachers in the classroom. The teachers at Kindergarten A do not teach the students how to read and write (Non-Calistung). Meanwhile, the teachers at Kindergarten B teach the students how to read, write and even count numbers (Calistung). The data were collected using instrument to meet the purpose of the study.

The assessment test of syntactic awareness was conducted to measure students' awareness in English structure. However, the present study covered children's syntactic awareness in Indonesian structure. The assessment test covered two main principles of syntactic abilities: identification and correction (Komara, 2016). Those identification and correction tasks are important assessments in the study. As for the tests, 24 sentences (12 active sentences, and 12 passive ones) are selected and all are in the form of simple Subject – Verb – Object sentences (e.g., Ibu membeli baju) to investigate the students' identification and correction skills. Since syntactic awareness has been used in word order correction

tasks, the present study also assesses children by letting them hear scrambled sentences and ask them to repeat the sentences by putting the words into the right order (Tunmer, 1987). Therefore, the study used word order tasks to examine syntactic awareness in Indonesian children aged 5 to 6. The tests are inspired by Nation & Snowling (2000) study who examined children's syntactic awareness in English structure of active and passive sentences. Before designing the instrument, the writer defined the indicators which represent syntactic awareness.

## ANALYSIS

The present study reveals that children aged 5-6 are able to perform syntactic awareness tests very well. Therefore, they have developed syntactic awareness especially in word order changes. The analysis of the study shows that more than a half item tests are answered correctly by the students (71.92%). There are several points that will be discussed in this subchapter: assessments of active and passive sentence tests, the comparison of two schools, and social aspects that characterize high performing students and low performing students. The test that was conducted in the study was active sentence tests and passive sentence tests. Each test also consisted of two assessments: identification and correction. Identification test assesses the students to find out whether the sentence is wrong or right. Meanwhile, Correction test is a test in which the students were required to arrange the wrong sentence into the right ones. The result shows that most of the children are able to identify the wrong sentences very well. However, some of the children have difficulty in correcting the wrong sentences.

First, based on both active and passive sentence tests, the result reveals that active sentences are much easier for the students than passive counterparts. The previous study by Nation and Snowling (2000) also found that in English context, passive sentences are more difficult than the active ones. Therefore, it is not surprising that passive sentence forms are more challenging for children rather than active ones. However, the result regarding active-passive sentence tasks in Indonesian context was different with Dardjowijojo (2005). In his research, Dardjowijojo (2000, as cited in Dardjowijojo, 2005) studied his granddaughter, Echa, and found that she has been able to use passive forms since 1 year and 9 months. Indonesian children form passive sentence patterns earlier than English children; therefore, passive forms are frequently used than active sentences. Based on the research that has been done, a capability in passive sentence test is normally easier to do. However, the present study shows that 76.69% of children answered active sentence task correctly. Meanwhile, in passive sentence tasks the children answered 67.16% items correctly. Specifically, in active sentence tests, the students performed well in identification tests rather than correction tests. In identification tests, 85.91% of the students answer correctly, while in correction tests, the students only answer 67.47%. Meanwhile, in passive sentence tests, the students did not perform as well as in the active sentence tests. In identification tests, the result shows that the students successfully answered 88.10% of the tests, while in correction tests, the students were only successfully answered 46.23%. Therefore, the result shows that children aged 5-6 are more likely to understand active sentences rather than passive sentences.

Second, from the overall results, the two kindergartens show an interesting result. The differences can firstly be seen from two different kindergarten's labels. The teachers in kindergarten A do not teach the students how to read, write, or count (*Non Calistung*), while the teachers in Kindergarten B teach the students how to read, write and count (*Calistung*). However, the students in kindergarten A (73, 61%) obtained higher result compared to kindergarten B (70, 24%). The similar study has previously conducted in Indonesia: it is another metalinguistic awareness test by Silviany (2016). She compared two kindergartens between *Calistung* kindergarten and *Non – Calistung* kindergarten. The result shows that there was no difference between the two kindergartens. Therefore, in the present study the result shows that teaching reading and writing may not help the children in syntactic awareness skill.

## CONCLUSION

Two main principles in syntactic abilities are identification and correction. Thus, the use of these principles shows children's syntactic awareness that is discussed in this study. The aim of this study is to explore syntactic awareness of kindergarten students in Indonesian context. Specifically, this study investigates the students' identification and correction skills. To see the syntactic awareness, students are given two tests related to Indonesian syntactic awareness.

There are two points that can be drawn from the present study to answer the research questions. Firstly, syntactic awareness in children aged 5-6 has emerged. Most of the students could identify the wrong sentences very well. However, a few students found difficult in correcting jumbled sentences. About 76.69% of the students correctly identify all the sentences; meanwhile only 67.16% of the students could arrange the wrong sentences to good ones. Surprisingly, the finding on Calistung kindergarten and *Non Calistung* kindergarten reveal interesting result. According to the final data, about 70.24% of the students in *Non Calistung* kindergarten answered all the tasks correctly, while 73.61% of the students could answered all the tasks correctly in *Non-Calistung* kindergarten. The result shows that *Non - Calistung* kindergarten obtained higher result than *Calistung* kindergarten. This means that teaching reading and writing at school may not affect students' syntactic awareness.

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