

## A LECTURER AND HIS AUTONOMOUS LEARNING: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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### Abstract

In this paper, I use an ethnographical approach, coupled with literature on autonomous learning to reflect on my experiences in learning foreign languages. I found that we can learn foreign languages easily when we develop good attitudes. We must not see differences in various languages as something that hinders us to learn the languages. Developing an open mind is an important requirement in learning languages. Languages seem to be difficult to study not because they are foreign languages but it is because we have negative attitudes about learning the language. However, learning technical terms in grammar often gives a big burden on learning foreign languages which often makes us discouraged from learning them.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, autonomous, learning

### Introduction

For me, teaching is fun. I like teaching and I enjoy it very much. I started to like teaching when I was in my senior high school. It was not a general senior high school but a senior high school preparing its graduates to be elementary school teachers, called *Sekolah Pendidikan Guru (SPG)*. I learned to be a good teacher in this school. Then, I was admitted to the Institute of Educational Teacher Training (IKIP) majoring in English education which made me further love the teaching profession.

After graduating from this institute, I was employed as a lecturer in the same institute. This marked the beginning of my career as a lecturer. In addition to meeting students, I also meet a lot of teachers as I have been involved in training teachers, both at the local and national levels. From my encounters with students and teachers, I found that they still made mistakes, especially in pronunciation and they often use expressions that were word-for-word translations. They also thought that English is a difficult subject. This has made me care about many aspects of foreign language learning, including pronunciation and natural expressions.

This article is written as my narrative from a retrospective lens. In this paper, I reflect on my experience in learning, making students and teachers aware of the importance of correct pronunciation, finding natural expressions, and convincing students and teachers that English is not a difficult subject to learn. My purpose in writing this article is to provide insights to readers about what we, students,

teachers, and lecturers can do to improve our language competence and how to deal with problems that seem to be a “piece of cake” but can have an important effect on language learning and language acquisition.

## Method

This study employed autoethnography as, through this research method, the researcher can investigate deeply into his own experience, especially in learning foreign languages. Autoethnography is a combination of the characteristics of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). A researcher who decides to use autoethnography is suggested, to begin with, a story that inspired him or occurred in his or her life and affected his or her future work (O’Hara, 2018). Autoethnography is getting more and more popular among academicians. Some doctoral dissertations even use autoethnography as the research design (Forber-Pratt, 2015; Weatherall, 2019). Although it is a study of oneself, it does not mean that it is only about oneself in isolation from others. It is, in fact, the study of oneself concerning others (Ngujiri et al., 2010).

## Findings and Discussion

### *Me and my teaching*

I will begin by describing my experience in teaching. I have been teaching for more than 37 years. However, I do not feel that I have mastered English from A to Z. I feel that there are still many things that I have not mastered. This can be seen when suddenly one of my students asked me something beyond my knowledge, such as “How do you say ‘*cinta bertepuk sebelah tangan*’ in English?”. At that time, I did not know how to say this in English although I know quite well the meaning of this expression. I frankly spoke to my student, “I don’t know. Let me try to find out how to say this in English.

Since then, I tried to find the appropriate English expression. One thing which I believe is good is that I am not ashamed to say that I do not know. I even told other students or teachers about the question and that I had not found the answer. It took a long time until one day a teacher in a training program said, “Sir, there is an expression to say ‘*cinta bertepuk sebelah tangan*.’” “What is it?” I said. Then, the teacher said, “Unrequited love.” I checked the dictionary and yes, that is right. This is the way I make sure that the information I get is correct.

On another day, another student asked, “Sir, how do you say ‘*Kekerasan dalam rumah tangga*?’”. At that time, I still did not know how to say this in English. Then, I said to my students, “Ok, I will try to find how to express it in English, and I hope you also try to find it. If next, I know how to express it, I will tell you. But, if you find it, please let me know.” And at the next meeting the week after, the student said, “Sir, I have found the expression.” “What is it?” I said. “Domestic violence,” the student said. “Ok, yes, that is right,” I said.

Through this, I hope that students will be aware that their lecturer is not the one who knows everything. Their friends or other people may know better in certain aspects or expressions than their lecturers. Then I provided them with an example that although we are Indonesians, we do not know all words in Bahasa Indonesia. I gave them the Indonesian word “*kelebut*” which is the meaning of “last” used as a noun (a block of wood or metal in the shape of a foot, used in making and repairing shoes). No one knew. Then we checked *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (the

standard Indonesian monolingual dictionary). In the Indonesian dictionary, the meaning of “*kelebut*” is “*acuan sepatu, kopiah, atau destar.*” It turned out that the students still did not understand what it means. This is because of the word “*acuan*”. Maybe, when the word is changed to “*pola*”, students will be able to understand what it means.

### ***My way of correcting mistakes in pronunciation***

Many students or even I can say most students and even teachers, are too confident with their pronunciation. They do not think that they make pronunciation mistakes. Commonly, when they find a word, they will pronounce the word without checking the dictionary for the correct pronunciation. They pronounce a word in a way a similar word is pronounced. For example, when they find the word “generic”, they will pronounce it as /ˈdʒenərɪk/ like the pronunciation of the word “general”. They did not check the dictionary. This word must be pronounced as /dʒəˈnerɪk/, with the stress on the second syllable.

I correct the students’ mistakes in pronunciation by asking them to check the dictionary. Students must bring a dictionary in the teaching-learning process. Even I would say, “If you don’t bring a dictionary, just close the door from outside” meaning that they are not allowed to join the class. However, I would allow students to borrow a dictionary from a friend.

Why don’t I tell the students the correct pronunciation? At least there are two advantages of asking students to check the dictionary. First, they will be aware of the importance of checking the dictionary for the correct pronunciation. Second, they will not say that another lecturer pronounces the word differently from my pronunciation.

When I meet teachers, I usually ask them the pronunciation of words that they are familiar with, such as “information”. On one occasion in a teacher training, I had two classes and each class consisted of about 28 teachers. I asked them how to pronounce “information”. Most of them pronounce it as /ˌɪnfəˈmeɪʃn/ instead of /ˌɪnfəˈmeɪʃn/. This is to remind teachers that they have to be careful with their pronunciation. They even make mistakes in pronouncing “a familiar word”. And the reason for the incorrect pronunciation is that they never check the dictionary.

I told teachers about “**learning while teaching**”. This is one of the ways I learn. I ask my students to bring a dictionary and then when I find a word that I have not checked its pronunciation in the dictionary, I will also use this opportunity to check its pronunciation. At this time, I am in the process of teaching, but at the same time, I am also learning.

My experience in correcting students’ mistakes did not always work as I expected. At the beginning of my care of correct pronunciation, I corrected every single mistake made by my students. Then, one day, one of my students said, “Sir, you made me feel doubtful when I want to speak.” This student was not the one who could not speak English well, but one who could speak English fluently. However, because she was careless, she made many pronunciation mistakes. And because of my correction, she was afraid that she would not be understood due to the incorrect pronunciation. To encourage this student not to be afraid of making mistakes, I told him, “When you speak, just speak. Don’t worry about making mistakes. Your listeners will be able to understand you from the context, even if you make pronunciation mistakes.”

### ***Accepting the language as it is***

In my encounters with students and teachers, I find that many of them still have the idea that English is a difficult subject. Believing that learning a foreign language is difficult is a sign that the person has a negative attitude toward learning a foreign language. People learning Arabic, French, German, Italian, and Russian often question why the nouns in these languages have genders. And the genders cannot be concluded from the nouns themselves. For example, in Arabic “*ustadzun*” means a male teacher and “*ustadzatun*” means a female teacher. It is easy to understand that they are masculine and feminine. However, with words such as “*ardlun*” which means “world” considered a feminine noun, and “*kita-bun*” which means “book” considered a masculine noun, people find it difficult to accept this categorization.

In my experience in learning Russian, I find that in the Russian alphabet, there are letters that are the same in form and pronunciation as the letters in English. Some letters are very much different in form from the letters in English and some letters are the same in form but different in the way how to read them. For example, P represents the sound of R, C represents the sound of S, Y represents the sound of U, and H represents the sound of N. So, a word spelled “PECTOPAH” is pronounced as “RESTORAN”. Such a fact is difficult to accept and many people ask why P is read as R, C read as S, Y read as U, and H read as N.

How can people with such a belief learn a foreign language successfully? They must develop a positive attitude, that is, they must accept the foreign language as it is. I told my students and teachers to say “*O begitu*”, not “*koq begitu?*”. In the case of genders in nouns, they must say, “O, in Arabic, the word ‘*kita-bun*’ is a masculine noun while ‘*ardlun*’ is a feminine noun.”

### ***Taking notes as soon as you find the expression***

Another important point I want to share in this article is that it is important to take notes as soon as we find an expression. This is related to my learning of ‘natural expressions’. What I mean by ‘natural expressions’ is expressions that I cannot translate directly from Indonesia into English. For example, I consider the translation of the expression ‘*Berdikit-dikit lama-lama menjadi bukit*’ translated into ‘Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves’ because the English translation is very much different from the Indonesian expression.

This suggestion is based on my experience when I taught the TOEFL preparation class. At that time, I found the expression which can be translated into ‘*Mbahmu*’ in Javanese or ‘*Enak aja*’ in Bahasa Indonesia. In English, it is ‘My foot!’ I did not write the expression as soon as I found it with the belief that I would remember it. Unfortunately, I forgot this expression soon and I could not find the resource where I found the expression. It was not until a couple of years that I finally found the English expression.

### ***My problem in learning Arabic grammar***

The final experience I want to share in this article is my experience in learning Arabic. I learn Arabic online. Every Sunday I get the material and every Monday I get the quiz to be submitted by Friday night. In the material, I have to learn grammar together with grammatical terms such as “*mudlof ilaih*”, “*isim nakiroh*”, etc. The quiz is also related to such grammatical terms. I find it very demanding and it is not

directly related to speaking. So, although I have learned Arabic on several levels, I still have difficulty speaking in Arabic. I assume that this is because I learn a lot of grammar with very little practice in speaking.

### **Conclusion**

Learning foreign languages can be fun. However, some points need to be taken into account. To make foreign language learning easy, a positive attitude needs to be developed. Being careful about pronunciation is another point to be considered although this does mean that we have to be perfect in our pronunciation. As the expression in a foreign language may be very different from the expression in our native language, learning and taking notes of such expression is of great necessity. Finally, too much focus on learning grammar with its grammatical terms and with a little practice of speaking the foreign language may hinder the mastery of the foreign language

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