

Prescriptive Grammar in Teaching English in Indonesian Schools

Luh Putu Artini

Abstract: This article is written in an attempt to argue that there is a need of uniformity in terms of grammar when English is taught as a foreign language. Thus, the idea that prescriptivism is "out of date" as well as "not permissive to language change" is corrected by presenting some arguments of the need to maintain its application. Some of those are related to language testing, language environment, size of foreign language classess and text books

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The term grammar in English does not seem to have a *neat, direct and clear cut definition* since it is a very complex aspect of language. In exploring the literature of linguistics, I found that every linguist has his/her own approach to define the term, or even avoid to give the definition. For instance, Leech (1985) uses the term grammar in reference to the mechanism according to which language works when it is used to communicate with other people; Milroy and Milroy (1999) define grammar based on standard ideology that it consists of rules that are imposed on usage from outside (for example by some authority and correctness); Huddleston (1989) views grammar in relation to the basic units (i.e. morphology and syntax) composing it. However, all linguists seem to agree that the discussion about grammar always involves two opposing sides: descriptive and prescriptive grammar; the former is described as involving grammatical

Luh Putu Artini is a lecturer of the Institute of Teacher Training and Education (IKIP) Singaraja.

analysis, introducing and explaining a variety of grammatical categories and using them to analyze selection of sentences; while the latter is concerned with telling someone to learn and use correct English and avoid the incorrect usage.

This paper is an attempt to present the notion of prescriptivism including the pro and contra arguments of applying it in language teaching. Its practical implication in certain contexts (such as in language testing and assessment) will also be discussed. Finally, to demonstrate that prescriptivism is somehow applicable, I will present a brief review on the syllabus and textbooks used in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Indonesian context.

PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR

The major characteristic of prescriptivism lies on the notion of "correctness". Unlike descriptivism which describes language as it is, prescriptionists tend to prescribe rules that guide the language users to use the language correctly. For example, the prescriptionists set the rule that a good sentence is never ended with preposition, yet in real life, sentences ending with prepositions are quite acceptable. In this case descriptionists are more tolerable to language change. They stand in opposition to the prescriptionists, and as they are more *permissive* they declare themselves as the "permissivists". Furthermore, Bloomfield states: "prescriptionists have occasionally won battle but it usually lose because language is not fixed" (Bloomfield, 1985:266). This quotation implied that there was a kind of *battle* between two groups of grammarians (i.e. prescriptionists vs. descriptionists) and his group (descriptionists) more frequently appear as *the winner*. To demonstrate the popularity of this group, he says: "In recent years, however, permissivists in particular have flourished. They have pointed out that language must accommodate contemporary trends, must be flexible and responsive to human change" (Bloomfield, 1985:267). Prescriptivism, according to Bloomfield, is less popular than the descriptivism because the former employs *strict approach* to language (i.e. by setting rules of correctness and incorrectness). This approach affects its followers' attitude toward language change, which according to Bloomfield, is neither tollerable nor permissive.

In addition, Milroy and Milroy (1999), put forward strong criticism to the point that the prescriptivists are not always true to their words in

term of the rules they have established. These writers state: "Some of the narrower consequences of language prescription are really quite well known, although they are usually accepted by public as quite reasonable and are not questioned" (Milroy & Milroy, 1999:3). Huddleston (1989), criticizes the prescriptionists' definitions of grammatical terms, such as noun, verb, adjective, tenses, etc. Noun for example, is defined as a name of a person, animal, place or thing. In the sentence "*The rejection of the proposal infuriated him*", the word *rejection* is neither name of person, animal, place or thing, but the prescriptivists agree to include this word to the noun group.

Milroy and Milroy (1999), however, do not *fight* the prescriptivism as Bloomfield does. In their discussion about prescription and standardization, they point out: "Although it is necessary to insist on the priority of description, it does not follow from this that prescription should never be studied at any point" (Milroy & Milroy, 1999:5).

Despite the fact that prescriptivism has some weaknesses to be applied in language teaching, Milroy and Milroy show their *open mindedness* to its positive sides. First of all, they mention the phenomena of normalization and standardization. According to them, some countries in which English is used as the mother tongue (in countries such as Australia, Britain, and USA) have now become multicultural society as the impact of migration. In this situation, uniformity in certain aspect of English need to be established, otherwise English would be damaged. Of course, this is not to suggest that prescriptive or standard English should be applied to all aspects of English. I agree with Milroy and Milroy (1999) to the point that prescriptivism is to normalise usage, and it is devised in the first place for writing rather than speech. I also agree that if prescriptive rules are imposed on speech, they may damage its expressive potential and flexibility.

The on-going discussion has demonstrated that prescriptive grammar has been considered *out of date* from the discriptionists' point of view, but there are reasons to believe that it should not be absolutely *thrown away* but, for some reasons, need to be maintained. The problem now, must this grammar be taught at schools. The following section discusses the problem.

THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR: IS IT NECESSARY?

First of all, Freeborn (1987) points out that every speaker of English knows the grammar because it provides the rules of putting words into

the right order (Freeborn, 1987:xii). He states: "But in the sense of to know about, those who know the grammar are those who have studied it in the way provided in textbooks and reference grammar book" (Freeborn, 1987:xiii).

Freeborn, in the quotation above, clearly supports the importance of grammar to be taught at schools even though the students have already known the rules of constructing good sentences. According to this writer, there are two kinds of *knowing grammar*: first, know how to use it and second, know about it. The native speaker of English are considered to have the first type of *knowing* since born (language intuition), while the second type which includes key terms, grammatical properties, etc. can only be known through formal learning.

The idea that all native speakers of English have implicit knowledge about the English grammar, and that this knowledge enables them to use and understand their language is also pointed out by Milroy and Milroy (1999) who support the idea of the need of teaching grammar at schools (page 3). Besides, the teaching of prescriptive grammar has practical implication to language testing (see section IV).

Clahsen (1988) views the need of teaching grammar from another perspective, that is from students themselves. According to this writer, the ability to communicate with the language is not the only important thing, especially for students who learn the language as a second language. The students are found to be proud of being able to understand slang or being able to convers freely with young people of their own age in the language they learn. Clahsen futher states: "What they don't realise is that, after the graduation, they will no longer be students but greduates trying to find a job and start a career" (Clahsen, 1988:25).

Here the need of learning grammar is correlated with the students' future. To know grammar is associated with the ability to use the language and better career. Eagleson et al (1984) is another writer who supports the teaching of grammar at schools with the reason that it is through grammar that we get insights into understanding more clearly what we do when we speak and how we convert our mental structures into verbal messages which can be comprehended by others (Eagleson et al, 1984:5).

Other writers such as Greenbaum (1988), Fortune (1992), basically agree with the teaching of grammar at school for similar reasons. Greenbaum puts forward an idea that prescriptive grammar can not be ignored by the

schools, but it should be placed in proper perspective. Unfortunately, what he mean by *proper perspective* is not clearly stated. The second writer, Fortune, who conducted research on learners' view on how important grammar is, found out that 94% of the subjects considered grammar played a very important role in language learning.

Huddleston (1989) who analysed textbooks used in the teaching of English in Australia in order to know what and how grammar is taught at schools conclude that almost all textbooks adopt a non-variationist approach to prescriptive grammar. He states that the textbooks adopt what may be called a non-variationist approach to prescriptive grammar. They operate, that is, with simple contrast between correct and incorrect, instead of recognizing that what is inappropriate in one context may be perfectly acceptable in another (Huddleston, 1989:21).

Despite the fact that descriptive grammar is the latest approach to describe language, the prescriptive grammar still has its position in the language teaching. In respect to how it is taught, Fortune (1992) found out that the approach adopted in the majority of published textbooks is deductive (Fortune, 1992:160). It means that the textbooks' writers present the general rules first before the students learn the details of how the rules work but, why. The best answer to this question is probably given by Milroy and Milroy (1999), for whom the notion of correctness employed by prescriptivism has a practical implication to language assessment procedures.

LANGUAGE TESTING: THE QUESTION OF LINGUISTIC ACCURACY

This section does not discuss the types of language test, such as those used in therapies, employment, etc. The discussion will be focussed on language tests in relation to teaching English as a foreign language at schools. To start with, I quote Neville (1988) who points out that in all areas of curriculum, the knowledge of curriculum content has to be assessed (Neville, 1988:5). In addition, this writer states that to assess this the educators must be able to construct a good test, because only through a good test the teacher will be able to gain insights which will help his understanding to the learners' language development and therefore also of their teaching needs. It is widely agreed that the requirements of a good test includes validity as well as reliability; the former is described as

the degree to which the test measures what it is supposed to measure, or can be used successfully for the purposes for which it is intended; and the later is described as a measure of the degree to which a test gives consistent results. Thus, a language teacher is required to be able to construct a language test beside other things like: comprehensive knowledge of the curriculum (as the test must be adjusted with this), effective teaching techniques, the content of lessons, etc.

Milroy and Milroy (1999) point out that the validity of the test must consider at least two things: linguistic realism and cultural linguistic bias. According to these writers, language testing must embody in their design an accurate conception of the contemporary language (language realism), and take into account the possibility of cultural linguistic bias. I agree with this because by considering linguistic realism in the tests it means that we are fair to language change and language variation. However, how can such tests be constructed when at the same time we have to establish validity and reliability. As far as the teacher is concerned (not the linguist), I think language tests (including achievement, performance, and diagnostic tests) are not only difficult to be constructed but are also hard to be assessed.

The second problem (when the test includes variation of language) is the possibility of cultural linguistic bias. The majority group of students will advantage more than the minority group. This is, again, the question of validity and reliability. Milroy and Milroy cite the work of Gorlach and Schroder (1985) who found out that language test used in the educational system underestimate the working-class children in Britain, to show the fact of bias. With all these in mind, I think there is a need for a kind of uniformity in the language to be taught and tested. In relation to this, the prescriptivists' idea about language falls in line with the need. Of course it does not mean that we have to rely a hundred percent on this. To support this, I refer back to Greenbaum (1988) who puts forward the idea that prescriptivism can not be ignored by the schools, but it should be placed in proper perspective.

It is agreed that to construct a good test is not easy, even though it tests about uniformity. The major problem now, which parts of the content of the curriculum must be tested. According to Higgs (1982), we have to avoid discrete point testing which tests only certain aspect of language (for example: the test of structure, the test of phonology, etc). It is because

such test would not measure the real linguistic abilities of the students (i.e. linguistic competence and linguistic performance of the students). The content of the test ideally covers the content of curriculum which has been covered in the teaching, and the items should be organised in such a way that they can be assessed objectively.

CONCLUSION

Prescriptivism in English has been extremely criticized by the descriptionists because it does not tolerate to *language growth*. However, the descriptionists do not seem to pay attention on certain conditions such as language testing, and the teaching of English as a foreign language in developing countries. In language testing, where validity and reliability is concerned, there is a need to have uniformity so that the tests can be objectively assessed, and when a language is learned as a totally foreign language, there must be certain rules that can guide the learners to understand the language. I hope with these facts in mind, it can be understood that prescriptivism in English is still needed.

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CONCLUSION

Prescriptivism in English has been extensively criticised by the teaching community because it does not tolerate to language diversity. However, the descriptions do not seem to pay attention to certain conditions such as language testing and the teaching of English as a foreign language in developing countries. In language testing, where validity and reliability is concerned, there is a need to have uniformity so that the tests can be objectively assessed, and when a language is learned as a totally foreign language, there must be certain rules that can guide the learner to understand the language. I hope with these facts in mind, it can be understood that prescriptivism in English is still needed.

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