ENGLISH LEARNERS’ LANGUAGE USED FOR CHATTING: A SYNTACTIC AND CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

Nanik Retnowati
English Education Program
Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
Universitas Ibn Khaldun Bogor
nanik.retnowati@uika-bogor.ac.id

ABSTRACT
Describing language is one of the most important tasks in Linguistics. Language description may give valuable contribution to language teaching practice. This paper is concerning with describing learners’ language used for chatting. Chatting is a spoken language which is written. As a natural language it may have its own structure which can be described. From the point of view of syntax, spoken language usually has its own set of grammar patterns which sometimes may be quite different from that in written language. Language used for chatting would likely provide important information moreover if it is done by language learners who are in the process of trying to make sense of the series of knowledge both on language elements and their usage in the real communication. Chatting task with foreigners was applied to the early semester of English learners. Using Syntactical and Conversation Analysis, this study found the characteristics of the natural language used for chatting and some strategies used by the participants to survive the communication. The description gives an important clue to the benefits of chatting activities for the English learners.

Keywords: Natural Language; Chatting; Syntactical Analysis; Conversation Analysis

INTRODUCTION
Describing language is one of the most important tasks in Linguistics. Language description may highlight the understanding about the complexity of language itself which in fact in line with the primary goal of scholarly research that is to describe the world. This further may guide to the following goal for deeper understanding; i.e. critical goal (Johnstone, 27). Critical goal may be used as the basis of interpreting in what way the practice of language instruction should be conducted. In other words, language description may become valuable contribution to language teaching practice.

In line with the idea stated above, studying and describing learners’ language is very important task. Learners’ language which is called as interlanguage by Selinker (1972), could give language teachers clues on what the learners have known or acquired and what the learners are trying to understand. Though it is not a fixed variety, learners’ language is a certain phenomenon in language usage which deserves investigating.

This paper is concerning with describing learners’ language used for chatting. As it is one of natural languages spoken by many people in daily life. Chatting is a spoken language which is written. As many other spoken world languages, chatting has no standard written form. In fact, as a natural language it may have its own structure which can be described. Even from the point of view of syntax, spoken language usually has its own set of grammar patterns which sometimes may be quite different from that in written language.

In order to make sufficient description of language used for chatting, Corpora is needed. This method
represents a digestive approach to deriving a set of abstract rules by which a natural language is governed or else relates to another language. Language used for chatting would likely provide important information moreover if it is done by language learners who are in the process of trying to make sense of the series of knowledge both on language elements and their usage in the real communication. Provided that, this piece of study, is closely related to conversation analysis. The theoretical background would be very useful in guiding the writer to go with the overall analysis. Thus, it can be said that describing language for chatting done by specific subjects would provide us with insight about how the natural language operates. The subjects of this research are English learners of the second and the eight semester of English Education Program of Ibn Khaldun University. They were given ten minutes for chatting with their own friends and with foreigners in English and were not allowed to use other language than English. To be more specific, the focus of attention would be on students’ verbal behavior in the turn taking process within limited time. Thus the theoretical framework needed in this study is syntactical and discourse analysis. The whole procedure of error analysis is not yet used in this research since the identification of the acceptability of the forms should be based on the normal language used for chatting done in target language. Since the corpora for target language syntactical pattern of language for chatting is not available in time, the writer would only make a description on the language features appear which in the future can be a useful source for doing error analysis for the purpose of language instruction. This study would also provide a theoretical analysis explaining that chatting may be one of useful activities for language learners in learning process.

To give the guideline for the research, the writer focused of the study first is on the syntactical description of learners’ language. It covers the description of the number of words in average appear in one turn conversation, the kinds of sentences mostly appear in learners’ language, the kind of sentence constructions mostly appear, the phrasal construction mostly appear, the distinctive features identified such as repetition or omission of construction. The second focus will be the description of how the turn taking run.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Natural Language**

Based on Wikipedia, a natural language (or ordinary language) is a language that is spoken, signed, or written by humans for general-purpose communication, as distinguished from formal languages (such as computer-programming languages or the "languages" used in the study of formal logic, especially mathematical logic) and from constructed languages.

Language used for chatting though a subfield of Computer-Mediated Communication (Thurlow in Mesthrie) is a natural language. It is one type of internet language (netlingo) which must have certain features in nature. As in any spoken language, there is no homogenous speech community in internet therefore needs to take certain contextual factors into account, for example: the format and type of channel (email or webpages), the participants (male or female, young or old), the length and nature of their relationship (long-term or fleeting, personal or business), the topic and purpose of the exchange, the general attitude of participants toward communication on the internet (enthusiastic or skeptical), whether interaction is asynchronous or synchronous.

The contextual characteristics of respondents’ language in this study is
described as follows. The netlingo channel is chatting board, the participants are adults learners both male and female who are enthusiastic in communicating using internet. They may have or not acquainted each other. The interaction was done synchronously. A very strict conduct on the respondents’ background was not done since this study is a preliminary study and was not meant to describe thorough description based on specific characteristics of respondent. This study is trying to have a general description on the learners’ language used for chatting which aimed at identifying learners’ strategy in coping with their lack of language competence.

Further, Thurlow in Mesthrie (2001, p.288), explained that the emphasis in netlingo is on a mixture of speed, efficiency, informality, and creative typography whereby many of traditional rules of grammar and style are subverted. Netlingo relies principally on expressions which is QWERTY-driven (i.e. whatever possible with the computer keyboard) and economic (i.e. saving a keystroke wherever possible). The recognized patterns are lexical compounds and blends, abbreviations and acronyms, minimal to no use of capitalization, punctuation, and hyphenation. Less regard for accurate spelling and/or typing errors, less or no use of traditional openings and closures.

Communication in internet channel is very interactive. It demands for speed, spontaneity, and brevity. There may be some strategies in corporate with the demands such as letter homophones, acronyms, and a mixture of both; creative usage of punctuation; capitalization and other symbols, onomatopoeic and or stylistic spelling, emoticons and smilies, direct request, interactional indicators. Werry as cited by Thurlow in Mesthrie (2001) notes the complex organization of sequences and exchanged structures, for examples the juxtaposition of conversational strands, short turns (usually about six words), high degrees of addressivity (i.e the use of nicknames), minimal backchannelling from listeners (e.g., uh huh, mm hm).

This study would also notice such phenomena as something very important to help the learners’ acquire the second language. Based on mentalist view, variability is systematic.

**Conversational Analysis**

Conversation analysis is commonly abbreviated as CA. It is the study of talk in interaction. CA generally attempts to describe the orderliness, structure and sequential patterns of interaction, whether institutional (in school, a doctor’s surgery, court or elsewhere) or in casual conversation or “talk-in-interaction”. CA is one of approaches to discourse analysis (DA). Many researches use CA method for analyzing discourse.

Conversation Analysis studies naturally-occurring talk on the assumption that spoken interaction is systematically orderly in all its facets (Sacks in Atkinson and Heritage 1984: 21-27). Conversation Analysis maintains it is possible to analyze talk-in-interaction by examining its recordings alone (audio for telephone, video for co present interaction). In CA there is no belief that the researcher needs to consult with the talk participants or members of their speech community. Based on the principles, the study conducted here may use chatting script as the primary data without checking the real meaning that the respondents are trying to deliver.

Further, based on Johnstone (2002, p.73), formulaic expressions are normally used in small talk, polite conversation, and chatting. Further, he also explains that in spontaneous casual everyday conversation, there are no pre set of rules about who talks, when or about what and for how long (no rules such as “oldest first, talks for three minutes, etc.). But conversation is
nonetheless structural, not chaotic. One way in which conversation is structured is via ‘turn taking’. Turn taking is a strategy by which humans regulate many aspects of social life.

Based on the approach offered by Halliday which is known as ‘systemic functional’, Johnstone (2002, p.99) explained that speakers tend to put relatively familiar information at the beginning of a sentence, and relatively new, unfamiliar information closer to the end. Hearers accordingly expect this order. This is labeled differently by experts such as ‘given and new information’, ‘themes and rhemes’, or ‘topics and comments’. Besides putting the conversation order following the previously mentioned rules, speakers may also show how the sentences they produce relate to each other by creating cohesion. Halliday in Johnstone (2002, p.101) describes five general grammatical and lexical strategies that speakers use for showing how the sentences they are creating are related in meaning; i.e. reference, the use of words or phrases that substitute the same grammatical slot such as so, do, one, etc., ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion.

Based on the explanation above, the writer would identify in the process of turn taking between respondents whether they follow the rules; i.e. to put relatively familiar information at the beginning of a sentence, and relatively new, unfamiliar information closer to the end and how the respondents achieve the meaning in turn taking by using grammatical and lexical strategies such as reference, the use of words or phrases that substitute the same grammatical slot such as so, do, one, etc., ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion.

Turn Taking

There are two important components in turn taking; i.e. constructional and allocational turn taking. The turn constructional component describes basic units out of which turns are fashioned. These basic units are known as turn constructional units or TCUs. Unit types include: lexical, clausal, phrasal, and sentential. These are grammatically and pragmatically complete units, meaning that in a particular context they accomplish recognizable social actions. The turn allocational component describes how turns are allocated among participants in a conversation. The three ordered options are: Current Speaker selects Next Speaker; Next Speaker Self-selects as Next; or Current Speaker Continues. Talk tends to occur in responsive pairs; however, the pairs may be split over a sequence of turns.

There are different ways of indicating that a turn will be changed. Formal methods: for example, selecting the next speaker by name or raising a hand. Next is adjacency pairs: for instance a question requires an answer. Intonation is another instance. It is a drop in pitch or in loudness. Gesture may also become an indication of turn taking, for instance, a change in sitting position or an expression.

Sequence Organization

Conversation is built in order. The sequence of organization of adjacency pairs may be initiated by pre sequences, followed by preferred organization which is often cultural bound. Repair organization may also be needed in conversation. It describes how parties in conversation deal with problems in speaking, hearing, or understanding. Repair is classified by who initiates repair (self or other) and by who resolves the problem (self or other) as well as by how it unfolds within a turn or a sequence of turns.

Syntactical Analysis

From the point of view of syntax, spoken language usually has its own set of grammar patterns which sometimes may
be quite different from that in written language. Since the data taken were in written form, the analysis would be based on the script written by the students. According to the Transformational Grammar, a sentence has a syntactic structure. Thus it believed that the learners’ utterances must be the representatives of certain syntactical structure. The first important point deals with the idea that the evidence for claiming that sentences have a syntactic structure in language comes from the speaker's intuition about the structure of sentences in his language. These structural intuitions which speakers have about the Syntax of their languages are two types: First is the constituents. It is intuition about how sound-sequences in sentences are structured into larger structural units. Second is categories. It is intuition about whether structural units belong to the same category or not.

To analyse the concept of sentence we can do the following analysis: words are grouped into lower constituents for example clause, phrasal, or word constituent of the sentence which is called the rank scale. Later, after the explanation of the constituents of a sentence the different levels could be identified and analyzed. All this information can be represented in diagrammatic form under the label of a tree diagram or bracketing. Thus sentences are built up out of sets of constituents, each of which belongs to a specific category.

A phrase can be identified on the basis of the word class membership of its most important constituent. A noun phrase is a phrase which has a noun as its most important constituent, an adjective phrase is a phrase whose principal element is an adjective, an adverb phrase is a phrase which has adverb as the most important constituent. The element that gives name to a noun phrase, adjective phrase or other phrases is the head of the phrase. The other elements in the phrase stand in a relation of dependency on, or subordination to, the head. Verb phrases and prepositional phrases do not have a head. In the verb phrase all the constituents are always verbs and none of them can replace the others. The only phrase type in which the noun phrase functions as a typical immediate constituent is the prepositional phrase.

**METHOD**

As many 25 students of semester two of English Education Program of Ibn Khaldun University were taken as respondents. They were given ten minutes time for chatting under free topics. The respondents were allowed to make chatting with foreigners or with their own friends. The respondents’ script were classified based on the kinds of syntactical constructions such as phrases, clauses, sentence (compound, complex, simple), and the sentence length. The writer then identify the most common syntactical construction used by the learners.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

*Syntactical Description on Learners’ Language Used for Chatting*

Based on the chatting script got from the respondents it can be identified that the average number of words that the respondents produced in each turn is six. As many sixty percent of the words are function words. It is interesting to find that when in one turn the respondents produce more than seven words in one turn, it must contain more than one sentence proposition.

In chatting with foreigners, it is identified that learners produce simple sentences and compound sentences. Simple sentence appears much more frequently than compound sentence. There are three types of sentences noted; i.e. statement (positive and negative), interrogative, and imperative. In statement, learners produce complete sentences, most of the sentences consist...
of NP + VP constituent. In interrogative sentences, it is identified that learners use only the question words such as what, where, why, etc. In long form of interrogative sentences, learners omit auxiliary verbs. There are only three kinds of phrase construction found; i.e. noun phrase, verb phrase, and prepositional phrase. Adverbial and adjective clause are not found in this study. Noun phrase constructions found in this study are very simple. They consist of Determiner + Noun, article + Noun, Quantifier + Noun, and Possessive adjective + Noun.

Syntactic description of the language of learners who were chatting with their own friends shows slightly different from chatting with foreigners. In this context, learners produce more words than in the previous context. In average, there are seven words that learners use in each turn. Similar to chatting with foreigners, learners produce simple sentences and compound sentences. There is no complex sentence found. Statements, interrogatives, and imperative are also found. Similar to chatting with foreigners, most of learners omit auxiliary in long interrogative form. Noun phrase construction appears more than prepositional phrase. The construction of noun phrase is Determiner + Noun, article + Noun, Quantifier + Noun, Possessive adjective + Noun.

Based on the description above, it can be underlined that learners produce various kinds of construction. However, there are also certain common constructions which appear in most learners’ language. The common constructions are actually not very complicated one. Most of them are also identified as formulaic expressions; for example, asl pls, ur name?, you have a pic? Are u married? etc. Therefore, it can be said that to be able to do chatting, the learners do not need high language competence. The slight difference findings between the participants (with foreigners and with friends) in chatting is probably caused by familiar context that both speakers share. However, it does not lead to the conclusion about to whom the learners best develop their conversation skill yet. This conclusion needs further more careful study.

Conversation Analysis on Learners’ Language for Chatting

There are two main concerns in this part. First is whether learners apply conversation rules to maintain the interaction. Second is what linguistic signals the learners use to perform conversation rules.

Conversation Survival

All learners are identified applying the conversation rules which are performed in various ways. Less variation is found in attention getting and topic termination. Based on the data, learners are able to talk a specific topic and maintain it. In maintaining the conversation learners use different strategies. This study also found that in maintaining the conversation learners use clarification, shifting, avoidance, and interruption. Therefore learners survive the communication until the interaction is closed. Learners could keep the conversation flow in spite of their limited knowledge.

The wrong usage of words or sentences does not interfere the interaction, as shown in the following example.

Fajar Pribadi: hi
tatejade@rocketmail.com: HEY WHAT UP
Fajar Pribadi: i’m okay ...are you?
.............................1
tatejade@rocketmail.com: YEA
Fajar Pribadi: where do you come from?
tatejade@rocketmail.com: U.K
Fajar Pribadi: i’m from Indonesia
Fajar Pribadi: how are you?
tatejade@rocketmail.com: FINE AND U
Fajar Pribadi: i will be fine...can i chat
The example above is taken from one of the respondents’ script. The underlined expressions are not the acceptable forms in target language. The learners use those form because of his incomplete knowledge of target language. Wrong use of words can be seen from sentence number 1, ‘okay’. The word okay is not the appropriate form in this context. Since ‘okay’ which refers to someone’s condition is normally used to explain that nothing is wrong with the person and expect the participant needs not to worry. The use of ‘okay’ needs a certain context for example “You look pale! are you ok?”. Thus, actually this respondent does not use appropriate word choice. Similar examples can be seen in sentences number 2, 3, and 4. The use of incorrect ‘be’ in sentence number 3 implies the learners’ incomplete knowledge of English grammatical rule. However, in this example we can identify that the flow of the conversation is not disturbed with the ‘wrong form’. This is shown in sentence number 4. The respondent misspelled the word ‘high’, he used ‘hih’, instead. The participant could understand it by giving appropriate response.

Linguistic signal

Attention getting

There are not many variations found for ‘attention getting’ performed by learners in chatting with foreigners situation. The expressions found are Hi, Hiiiii, Hello, and m here. It is identified that attention getting is always performed by chatters; the initiation can be both from learners or their participants. More attention getting variation found when learners open the interaction with their own friends. Other linguistic signals found are assalamu’alaikum, gud evening, how are u friend, hi friend. What are u doin?.

Topic nomination

In learners chatting with foreigners, all first topic nomination is about asl which is initiated mostly by participants. The next nomination is about personal identity such as school, job, and family. Topic nomination is express both directly and indirectly. Topic asl appear just after attention getting. It is expressed directly. For example:

L (learner): Hi….
P (participant): asl, pls.

Personal identity nomination is express directly or indirectly. The direct way is shown in the following example:

L: are u student?
P: yup. n u?

Topic development

In maintaining the conversation, speakers may develop topic or use different ways such as clarification, shifting, avoidance, and interruption. That fact is also found in this study. Based on the script, the writer identifies that learners and participants are talking about various topic. One topic may be performed more than one turn as follow.
English Learners’ Language Used for Chatting: A Syntactic and Conversation Analysis
(Nanik Retnowati)

P : 35m Australia
L : ooow,u want to know my opinion abt Australia???
L : it’s good opinion… I promise
P : ok
L : Australia is my favorit country after my country….
P : that’s good
L : have u been there b4?
P : nooo…I really hopping that….

In the writer’s interpretation, L has misused of the question word ‘wen’ in context. Therefore, P could not give sufficient answer. P initiates to shift the topic.

To keep the conversation flow, speakers should be able to maintain it in any ways if the situation demands them to do so. The example of speakers’ clarification is shown in the following example:
P : ok so wat looking u like?
L : why u ask abt that??are u a good man,right?
P : do u understand my question
L : yes,what m I like,u mean
P :yes u don’t have the answer
Wats wrong in my question
Other strategy is shifting. The example is shown below.
P : m/f
L : f
P : dubai
L : owh u’r domisily
P :wat
L : btw what r u doing now

In the example, P (participant) does not understand the word ‘domisily’. L (Learner), then, shift the topic.

In case of avoidance, the following example would explain.
P : wat you do in life?
L : I have part time that I teaching
P : ok fine
P : ur pic can I see
P : ur pic can I see
P : ur pic can I see
L : where do u live right now??????????
P would request L to show him her picture, however L is still trying to continue the conversation though she avoids camera and picture topic.

Topic interruption is shown in the following example:
P : yes, we have got shopping together
L : Sarah, sorry if I interrupt you… because I have a task to chat with native speaker...
L: friend sorry….but I have to go
P: ok
P: bye see u next time
L: I wanna go home. I must study for my final exam tomorrow
L: ok…
L: by
P: bye
L: nice to talk to u
L:bye

Terminating the conversation is done directly and indirectly. The direct termination only take one turn of each speaker.
L :Ok frnd c u tom
P : ok,bye
Terminating is also done longer as shown in the following example.

In the same case is also shown in the following example.
L : wooww...india,do you like song kuch kuch take? or do you know amitabachan?hahahaha..
P : yasaa
L : hOhOhOh.....really?? when do you like it?
P : mmmmmmmm
L : so,what do you do? I’m from indonesia,do you know indonesia?
P : yaaaaaaa
CONCLUSION
Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that learners produce very simple construction, yet they can maintain the interaction. Learners also follow the rules of conversation manifested differently among the individuals. However the participants are always successful in continuing the flow of the conversation.

Describing learners’ language is very important for language teachers in order to understand the ongoing process of language acquisition. This is also applied in learners’ language used for chatting. It may not give teachers knowledge about the learners’ linguistic competence but it may convince teachers that chatting is a good media to enhance the process of language acquisition. As stated by Evelyn Hatch (1978) quoted by Brown (1987,p.206) “In second language learning the basic assumption has been that one first learns how to manipulate structures, that one gradually builds up a repertoire of structures and then, somehow, learns how to put the structures to use in discourse. We would like to consider the possibility that just the reverse happens. One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed”. In this study it is identified that through chatting, learners are able to apply conversation rules; i.e. attention getting, topic nomination, topic development, maintenance of a conversation involves clarification, shifting, avoidance, and interruption by using very simple language knowledge.

For the English Education Program of Ibn Khaldun University, it is recommended that chatting with foreigners can be given as an obligatory task for Speaking Class especially at the early semesters.

REFERENCES
Cole, Peter. Ed. 19….Syntax and Semantics. Vol 9.
Corder, S.Pit. 1981. Error Analysis and Interlanguage. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Hudson, R.A. 1985. Sociolinguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Holmes, Janet. 2001. nd ed. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited
James, Carl. 1998. Errors in Language Learning and Use. London: Longman.
Johnstone, Barbara. 2002. Discourse Analysis. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
Matthews, Peter. 1997. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Mesthrie, Rajend. Ed. 2001. Concise Encyclopedia of Sociolinguistics. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
Renkema, Jan. 1993. Discourse Studies. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company
Wardhaugh, Ronald. 1993. Investigating Language. Oxford: Blackwell.