

# Salasika

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CHILD, AND SOCIAL INCLUSION'S STUDIES**



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Facing Indonesia-Thai Gen Y Students' Future by 2030**  
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# Pragmatics Competence of Preschool Age Children

Eti Setiawati & Putri Kumala Dewi  
*Fakultas Ilmu Budaya Universitas Brawijaya*  
teh\_ety@yahoo.co.id & ety64@ub.ac.id

## ABSTRACT

Children's language acquisition begins at the age of one, that is when the child begins to learn to speak. From that age, children have possessed speech act competence. The speech act competence that is obtained by preschool-age children may cover different kinds of speech acts, such as directive, representative, and expressive acts. These speech acts may be realized in language form as one or two words that describe a particular function of speaking. The objectives of this research are (1) to describe the competence of speech act forms of preschool-age children, (2) to describe the competence of speech act functions of preschool-age children, and (3) to describe the competence of speech act types of preschool-age children. This research uses a qualitative research approach with the descriptive method. The research data consists of utterances of preschool-age children that contain speech act forms, functions, and types. The data analysis model uses the interactive model by Miles and Huberman with an approach based on pragmatics theory and ethnography of communication. Research results show that preschool-age children have possessed (1) competence of speech act forms of interrogatives, imperatives, and declaratives of single syllables, single words, and single sentences; (2) competence of speech act functions of asking, ordering, stating, and inviting; and (3) competence of speech act types of directives, representatives, declaratives, and expressives.

KEYWORDS: *competence, form, function, speech act types, preschool-age children*

## INTRODUCTION

A child is born in the social world. Since the beginning of his life, a child interacts with the nearest person, although this communication is still one-way. Parents talk about something, and babies simply hear. In their growth, children acquire language gradually, while they are also brought into a social life where rules of behavior in life exist. The rules are necessary for the life in the society. Thus, a child must also master the socio-cultural

norms prevailing in that society. Some of these norms are embedded in the language so that children's language competence is not limited only to the so-called language usage but also the use of language, so the child must also master pragmatic abilities (Dardjowidjojo, 2000).

The pragmatic abilities of preschoolers as described above are also explained by child pragmatic experts, including Ninio and Snow, Schieffelin, and Babelot and Marcos. Ninio and Snow (as cited in

Dardjowidjojo, 2000) suggest that children's non-verbal communication before they can produce a meaningful form is their pragmatic ability. They say that children already know the essence of language use when the child is a few weeks old. Furthermore, Kent and Miolo (1996) say that the fetus was exposed to human language through the intrauterine environment (Dardjowidjojo, 1996). The difference between an adult and an infant is that the baby responds to adult speech non-verbally. Smiles, laughter, tears, and small cries are all pragmatic tools a child uses.

Most children's language acquisition begins at the age of one year, from when the child begins to learn to speak. From that age, children possess speech act competence. The speech act competence that is obtained by preschool-age children may cover various kinds of speech acts, such as directive speech acts, representative speech acts, and expressive speech acts. These different kinds of speech acts may be realized in language form as one or two words that describe a particular function of speaking. An example is shown in the following conversation.

Speech context: A father is feeding one of his children. Suddenly, the child, Zahra, says:

Zahra: "*Papa, papa!*" (while pointing to the mouth of her father)

The utterance "*Papa, papa!*" constitutes a speech act which has the language form of two words that

consist of nouns. The utterance has a function of commanding or ordering. The utterance of the preschool-age child can be meaningful if the interpretation of the meaning of the utterance involves the context, which is a part of its meaning.

Seen from the type, the utterance of Zahra in the quote above is a directive speech act, an act that demands the hearer to perform something. With the directive speech act of "*Papa, papa!*", Zahra commands her father to put rice into his mouth as her father puts rice into her mouth.

This example of the speech act by Zahra is a unique phenomenon, since, seen from the language elements, they have not acquired much of the linguistic competence of adults, but seen from the pragmatic side, the child (Zahra) has already possessed pragmatic competence. Regarding this, as mentioned by Dardjowidjojo (2000), non-verbal communication in children before they are able to express meaningful forms shows children's pragmatic abilities.

Based on this background, the researchers are interested in examining the speech act competence of preschool-age children.

These are the desired objectives of this research:

- (1) To describe the competence of speech act forms of preschool-age children;
- (2) To describe the competence of speech act functions of preschool-age children; and

- (3) To describe the competence of speech act types of preschool-age children.

To reveal the phenomenon of the speech act competence of preschool-age children, an eclectic theoretical approach with pragmatics and ethnography of communication is used. The phenomenon of speech act expression by preschool-age children occurs in social interactions. In this case, speech acts are used to carry out a variety of social actions, such as asking, requesting, and commanding adults and friends to do something. This is in line with the view of Hymes (1974) that language interaction with social life is first and foremost seen as a matter of human actions that are based on the knowledge that enables people to peruse language. As such, Hymes (1974) examines communicative acts not only from the formal linguistic elements, but also functional elements.

Next, Hymes (1974) explains that the knowledge of language as communicative competence is not only about grammatical knowledge of a sentence, but also the appropriateness of its usage. The same is true of speech act competence. The speech act competence of children is marked by the presence of the ability to apply the principles of conversation, covering certain participants, topics, times, places, and behaviors.

Children do not only imitate or internalize the world around them. They attempt their hardest to interpret or understand their cultures and to participate in them. In attempting to understand the world of adults, children collectively

create their worlds and cultures (Carsaro, 1997; as cited in James, 2001). By doing so, children will have gained a speech act competence with a cultural perspective of the environment where the children live.

To examine the speech act competence of preschool-age children, an approach using pragmatics theory and ethnography of communication is used. Pragmatics theory is used to analyze the speech act competence of the children. The pragmatics theory used here refers to the pragmatic concepts of Mey (1993), who proposed that pragmatics is necessary if a more complete, in-depth, and generally reasonable explanation is desired on the language behaviors of people. Sometimes, even the pragmatic explanation is the only possible explanation. Concerning the utterances of children, pragmatics theory can be used to interpret these utterances, which may be only composed of one word, as a whole and as a meaningful utterance, since in pragmatics even utterances of a single word can represent the communicative intents of children.

Meanwhile, the usage of ethnography of communication is based on the view of Hymes (1974) that the ethnography of communication does not divide communicative events or actions by separating form-message and usage context from each other, but maintains the double hierarchy of the relationships found among messages and contexts. The ethnography of communication is related to several general perspectives on the behavior of humans, including language

behaviors, which are a social act of humans.

Studies related to pragmatics have been conducted by several researchers, among others Dardjowidjojo (2000), who described pragmatics of one- to five-year olds, covering rules of conversation, implicature, deixis, and discourse. A study by Arifin (2000) analyzed one aspect of pragmatics, that is implicature in conversations of preschool-age children, covering forms of implicatures, functions, and pragmatic implications. A study by Setiawati (2012) studied the directive act competence of preschool-age children, covering forms, functions, and strategies. A study by Khoerunisa (2016) analyzed the assertive speech acts of preschool-age children at Angkasa Kindergarten of Tasikmalaya, with an emphasis of coverage on forms, functions, and strategies.

In the effort to understand the phenomenon of speech act competence of preschool-age children, the qualitative approach is used in this research. The use of this approach is based on the nature of the analysis in this research, which is descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory regarding the speech act competence of preschool-age children. Using this approach, an interpretation of the forms, functions, and types of speech act competence is based on the experienced setting. This is done to produce accurate findings of the competence of speech act forms, functions, and types of preschool-age children.

The data in this research consists of utterances with certain speech act forms, functions, and types of preschool-age children, covering (1) competence of speech act forms of preschool-age children, (2) competence of speech act functions of preschool-age children, and (3) competence of speech act types of preschool-age children. The research data were collected through field notes as well as audio and video recordings. The research data were obtained from the data sources in the form of transcripts of conversations produced by preschool-age children when communicating with adults or friends of a similar age.

The subjects in this research are children of ages of 1-3 years old that reside in Malang. The subjects are Zahra (1.5 years) and Muhammad Mifzal Ramadan (2.5 years). Both subjects come from educated families of the couples of Ahmad and Lia, residing at Jl. Candi Sari IV No.8 Lowokwaru, and Iwan Kristianto and Inayatul Aini, residing at Jl. Candi Sari IV No.3 Lowokwaru. The criteria for determining preschool-age children selected as the research subjects are children who (1) grow up and develop normally in mind and body, which means having complete parts of the body for speaking and showing normal development of cognition; (2) are able to speak the Indonesian language in communication as their first language; (3) have the ability to communicate with speaking partners; (4) can communicate in verbal speech that can be acceptably interpreted by the hearer as a social act (Ninio & Snow, 1996, p. 17); and (5) are toddlers that have not been enrolled in elementary school and

are between 1-3 years of age which depicts a level of cognition in the transition period between the prediction of poor and relatively good cognition, although on average the prediction of improvement is good (Bracken, 1983, p. 12).

To obtain a real picture of the speech act competence of preschool-age children in this research, the techniques of participant observation and non-participant observation were used. In participant observation, the researcher took part in creating a communicative environment to obtain data on the speech act competence of preschool-age children. The aims of using participant observation are (1) to participate in providing activities in a social situation and (2) to observe the activities of the subjects and physical aspects of the situations that occur during communication (Spradley, 1980, p. 54; Duranti 1993, p. 99; Bogdan & Taylor, 1993, p. 31). Meanwhile, non-participant observation conducted by the researcher only involved observing the preschool-age children when the research subject is communicating with other adults and children of similar ages around the subjects. These two research techniques were accomplished simultaneously by creating recordings. This was conducted by the researcher to obtain as much data as possible on speech acts of preschool-age children; thus, the research data was obtained when the children communicated both with the researcher and with other people.

In addition to the techniques of observation and recording, field notes were also used in this research. Field notes comprise written

explanations on what is heard, seen, experienced, and thought by the researcher while data collection and reflection is performed. In the application of this technique, the researcher perused a field note format that contains data ID, observation date, speech contexts, and descriptive as well as reflective notes. The importance of the usage of field notes in this research is that there may be many important things to reflect regarding acquisition of speech acts of preschool-age children, especially concerning external factors that contribute to meanings of speech acts of children.

Data analysis was conducted both in the data collection process and after the data had been collected. The data analysis procedure used in this research is the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1996). Through this model, data analysis was conducted through the activities of (i) **data collection** by the techniques of observation, recording, and field notes; (ii) **data reduction** to identify the usage of speech act forms, functions, and types of preschool-age children; (iii) **data presentation** through coding and classification in a matrix; and (iv) **conclusion** or verification of the acquisition of speech acts of preschool-age children. In verification, triangulation was performed, involving the triangulation of data, method, and analysis, to obtain expert legitimation of the data.

In this part, the research results are explained, covering (1) competence of speech act forms of pre-school age children, (2)



competence of speech act functions of pre-school age children, and (3) competence of speech act types of pre-school age children. The research results are detailed in the following sections below.

## COMPETENCE OF SPEECH ACT FORMS OF PRE-SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

The competence of speech act forms that are acquired by pre-school age children may be in the form of utterances of one sentence composed of one or two or more words. The utterances that may appear may have the speech form of questions (interrogatives), commands (imperatives), and statements (declaratives).

### Question Form (Interrogative)

Utterances in the form of questions or interrogatives contain a query that is directed to another person. Interrogatives are accompanied by question words (what, where) and a querying intonation.

- (1) Context: Zahra and Eti are talking.

Zahra: *Ini apa?* [What is this?]

- (2) Context: Zahra is being carried by her father. Eti approaches. Sera shows a watch to Zahra.

Zahra: *Mana jam?* [Which is the watch?]

- (3) Context: Mifzal is being fed by Sera while playing, inserting various shapes into a box.

Mifzal: *Mana?* [Which?] (choosing shapes that fit into the toy box)

- (4) Context: Mifzal takes one of the wooden toy shapes and shows it to Sera.

Mifzal: *Ini?* [This?] (inserting the toy into the box as it fits).

- (5) Context: Mifzal takes a toy car and moves the toy car with his hand while making “vroom, vroom” sounds with his mouth.

Sera: Mifzal mainan apa? [What is Mifzal playing?]

Mifzal: *Yang ini?* [This?] (lifting the toy, he is holding and showing it to Sera)

The utterances of Zahra and Mifzal in excerpts 1-5 above show the form of interrogative utterances that have the properties of the usage of question words and a querying intonation. The question words used by Zahra are “*Apa*” and “*Mana*” as in excerpts 1 and 2. Meanwhile, Mifzal uses a querying intonation in excerpts 4 and 5 and the question word “*Mana*” in excerpt 3 for interrogative forms.

### Command Form (Imperative)

Utterances in the imperative form are utterances that primarily have the intent to desire the conversation partner do something for the speaker. The competence of the imperative form in the utterances of pre-school age children as discovered in this research is in the form of verbs and pronouns as well as the use of the imperative word “*Ayo*” [come]. This is seen in the below excerpts.

- (6) Context: Zahra is sitting in a chair, and in front Lin is feeding Zahra. Lin is about to stand when suddenly Zahra spoke.

Zahra: *Duduk!* [Sit!] (pointing to the chair in front)

- (7) Context: Zahra is being fed by her father on the front porch. Zahra's father is squatting in front of Zahra, who is sitting in a small chair. When her father was about to put the spoon into Zahra's mouth, suddenly Zahra covers her mouth with her left hand and pointed her right hand to her father's mouth.

Zahra: *Papa! Papa!*

- (8) Context: Mifzal is playing, inserting shapes into a box, while being fed by Sera. Suddenly Adit approaches Mifzal and Sera.

Mifzal: *Ayo Adit! Sini!* [Come Adit! Here!]

The utterances of Zahra and Mifzal are categorized as being in the imperative form. In excerpts (6) and (7), Zahra utters the imperative form with a single verb of "*Duduk*" and a single pronoun of "*Papa*". Mifzal meanwhile utters the imperative form with the imperative marker, the word "*Ayo*", as in excerpt (8), "*Ayo Adit! Sini!*"

### Statement Form (Declarative)

Declarative utterances are in the form of statements that intend to inform or tell something to the conversation partner. The statement usually consists of information or the revealing of events to the conversation partner. Data analysis

results show the following declarative utterances.

- (9) Context: Zahra is walking to the porch. Zahra is looking at Sera, who is holding a doll. Suddenly Sera dropped the doll.

Zahra: *Jatuh.* [It fell.] (pointing to the dropped doll)

- (10) Context: Sera handed a wooden crescent-shaped toy of a blue color.

Sera: *Ini red.* [This is red.]

Mifzal: *Bukan.* (taking a *red* colored toy) *Ini red.* [No. This is red.]

- (11) Context: Zahra walks up to the traveling vegetable vendor outside her house. Zahra notices the chicken passing in front.

Zahra: *Ayam, ayam.* [Chicken, chicken.]

The utterances of Zahra and Mifzal in the above excerpts are in the form of declaratives composed of one and two words. These declarative utterances contain the revealing of events and information. Excerpt (9) shows a declarative utterance that indicates that a doll is dropped. Excerpt (10) shows a declarative utterance that contains information, and excerpt (11) shows a declarative utterance that contains the indication of an event, the chicken that passes in front of Zahra.

## COMPETENCE OF SPEECH ACT FUNCTIONS OF PRE-SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

The competence of speech act functions found among utterances of pre-school age children cover the

functions of asking, ordering (commanding), asserting, confirming, providing information, and inviting. These speech act functions can be seen in the following sections.

### Asking

Asking is a speech act function that wishes the conversation partner to give something to the speaker as demanded in the utterance. This may be seen in the following excerpts.

- (12) Context: Zahra follows her grandmother to the vegetable vendor in front of the house. Several women have gathered in front of the vegetable vendor, intending to shop. Some of the women are picking vegetables. Zahra's mother feeds rice to Zahra, but Zahra refuses. Zahra wants to pick vegetables like the women.

Zahra: *Tu... tu!* [That... that!] (pointing to the hanged plastic bags)

Vegetable Vendor: (seeing Zahra, handing her a plastic bag) *Ini nih!* [Here!]

Zahra: *Acih.* [Thank you.] (taking the plastic bag).

- (13) Context: Zahra's mother is frying *tempeh*. Zahra approaches her mother and begins to tug on her mother's hands.

Zahra: *Pepe.* (with hands in the air).

- (14) Context: Sera and Adit are tidying up toys. One by one the toys are put into a box.

Mifzal: *Aku. Aku.* [Me. Me.] (taking a toy from Adit's hand)

The utterances of Zahra and Mifzal in excerpts (12)-(14) have the function of asking.

The utterance of "*Tu... tu!*" by Zahra in excerpt (12) has the function of asking, where it is used by Zahra to ask the vegetable vendor for a plastic bag. In excerpt (13), the utterance of "*pepe*" has the function to ask for the *tempeh* that Zahra's mother is frying. The same is true for excerpt (14) where the utterance "*Aku. Aku.*" has the function of asking. Mifzal is asking for a toy, as he wants to help put the toys back into the box.

### Ordering

The function of ordering is characterized by utterances that demand the conversation partner to do as requested in the utterance. The function of ordering may be marked by the use of the basic verb form (and in Indonesian, the suffixes *-lah* or *-kan*). However, the encountered utterances show that the function of ordering is more represented with the use of verbs and pronouns as in excerpts (6) and (7).

### Confirming

The utterances of pre-school age children are found to contain the function of confirming. Based on analysis results, the utterances of pre-school age children contain the function of confirming as evidenced in the following excerpts.

- (15) Context: Mifzal is choosing the shapes to be put in a box. The shapes are all different, so Mifzal is choosing the right one.

Mifzal: *Ini?* [This?] (showing the shape that had been chosen to Sera)

- (16) Context: Mifzal is playing with a toy car. Adit approaches Mifzal.

Eti: *Lho mobilnya kan banyak.* [Do you not have a lot of cars?]

Mifzal: *Yang ini?* [This one?] (lifting the car being played).

The utterances of Mifzal in excerpts (15) and (16) contain the function of confirming. The function of confirming in the utterances of Mifzal is realized in the questions “This?” and “This one?”

### Giving Information

Many of the utterances of pre-school age children contain the function of giving information. The information may be given by revealing occurrences or even simple expressions. The examples of this speech act function may be seen in the below excerpts.

- (17) Context: Eti is showing a video on a cellphone and Zahra and her mother are watching the video. Suddenly the screen goes black.

Zahra: *Abis.* [It is over.] (pointing to the cellphone screen).

- (18) Context: Zahra has finished taking a bath. Her mother is putting on her clothes. Zahra drops her diapers.

Zahra: *Jatuh.* [It fell.] (pointing to the diapers).

## COMPETENCE OF SPEECH ACT TYPES OF PRE-SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

Based on data analysis results, in this research there is a variety of speech act types of pre-school age children. Zahra and Mifzal utilize the directive, representative, expressive, and declarative types. The imperative speech act form always represents the directive speech act type, as in excerpts (6), (7), and (8). The utterances of “*Duduk*”, “*Papa*”, and “*Ayo Adit, sini!*” are directive-type utterances.

The representative speech act type has been used by pre-school age children in speaking. This may be observed in excerpts (17) and (18). The utterances “*Abis*” and “*Jatuh*” have the intent to inform that the video is over and the diaper falls. The same is true of the declarative speech act type. The utterances in excerpts (9), (10), and (11) represent the declarative speech act type.

The utterances of pre-school age children also exhibit the competence of the expressive speech act type. This is observed in the following excerpts.

- (19) Context: Zahra opens the front gate of her home. Zahra sees Sera going out of her house.

Zahra: *Kakak! Kakak!* (shyly smiling)

- (20) Context: Zahra is being fed by her mother in the yard. Suddenly a roaring sound is heard from above. Zahra looks up.

Zahra: *Sawat! Sawat!* [Plane! Plane!]

(21) Context: Mifzal is playing toy cars with Adit. Sera joins in while bringing in a broken toy car.

Mifzal: *Aku takut!* [I am afraid!]

Eti: *Takut apa sih.* [Afraid of what?]

Mifzal: *Takut ini* [Afraid of this.]  
(pointing to the broken toy car)

Eti: *Itu kan mobil.* [But it is a car.]

Mifzal: *Ini mobil.* [This is a car.]  
(showing a better car).

The utterances of Zahra and Mifzal in excerpts (18), (19), (20), and (21) are of the expressive speech act type. The utterances of "*Kakak!*", "*Sawat!*", and "*Aku takut!*" are expressive speech acts that are said with a high and spontaneous intonation.

Based on the results of the research findings, it can be seen that pre-school age children have possessed competence of speech act forms, functions, and types. The speech act forms, functions, and types represented in the utterances of pre-school age children are various. The imperative speech act form, for example, has the functions of asking, commanding, and confirming, similar to the directive speech act type. As explained by Ninio and Snow (1996), at the age of 18 months children have already produced requests to perform activities. At the relevant stage, children have also mastered the functions of request acts. The functions of requesting children master include asking for information, asking for clarification, and asking for actions.

According to Searle (in Martinich, 2001: 176), in the cases above, it is important to emphasize that these

utterances are intended to be requests; the speaker intends to instill in the hearer the knowledge that a request has been put forward to the hearer, and the speaker intends to instill the knowledge by having the hearer understand the intent to comply with the request.

Also, the way pre-school age children speak also has depicted the expression of culture in speaking as expressed by Zahra in excerpt (12). After Zahra is given a plastic bag by the vegetable vendor, Zahra says "*acih*" (thank you). As expressed by James (2001), children do not only imitate or internalize the world around them. They try their hardest to interpret or understand their culture and to participate in it. In attempting to understand the world of adults, children collectively create their worlds and cultures. Children collectively re-learn and re-produce social rules and expectations of a particular culture.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that preschool-age children have possessed the competences of:

- (1) speech act forms of interrogatives, imperatives, and declaratives in the form of single syllables, single words, and single sentences;
- (2) speech act functions of asking, commanding, stating, and inviting; and
- (3) speech act types of directives, representatives, declaratives, and expressives.

The findings are one of the pragmatic aspects that emerge in the



pre-school child's preaching. Research studies related to pragmatic competence can be extended in scope. Other aspects that can be studied are implicature, presupposition, inference, and strategy of preschoolers. Thus, the pragmatic aspect of preschoolers will be more complete and more holistic, and preschoolers' preaching will be easier to interpret and understand.

Knowing the form, function, type, and strategy of child speaking lets adults interpret adult speech more easily. Besides, the impact of knowing the competence is to embed character education by accommodating patterns of speech that is spoken by the children.

It is recommended that parents, guardians, and teachers provide greater exposure to preschool-age children, so that children may grow and develop speaking and thinking abilities maximally.

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## ABOUT

SALASIKA etymologically derived from Javanese language meaning 'brave woman'. SALASIKA JOURNAL (SJ) is founded in July 2019 as an international open access, scholarly, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal publishing theoretically innovative and methodologically diverse research in the fields of gender studies, sexualities and feminism. Our conception of both theory and method is broad and encompassing, and we welcome contributions from scholars around the world.

SJ is inspired by the need to put into visibility the Indonesian and South East Asian women to ensure a dissemination of knowledge to a wider general audience.

SJ selects at least several outstanding articles by scholars in the early stages of a career in academic research for each issue, thereby providing support for new voices and emerging scholarship.

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There are other journals which address those topics, but SJ approaches the broad areas of gender, sexuality and feminism in an integrated fashion. It further addresses the issue of international collaboration and inclusion as existing gaps in the area of academic publishing by (a) crossing language boundaries and creating a space for publishing and (b) providing an opportunity for innovative emerging scholars to engage in the academic dialogue with established researchers.

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