

THE ACQUISITION OF GAMBITS BY CLASSROOM FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS OF INDONESIAN

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A learner trying to acquire communicative competence in a second or foreign language must become both linguistically competent by mastering the grammar of the language and pragmatically competent by learning to use the language appropriately (Thomas, 1983). One measure of pragmatic competence is the learner's ability to use pragmatic formulas appropriately (Schmidt, 1993). This paper will focus on the acquisition of one particular type of pragmatic formula, gambits, by beginning learners of Indonesian in a foreign language classroom.

The term *gambit* in its linguistic sense was coined independently at about the same time by Keller (Keller & Taber Warner, 1976) and Edmondson (1977) to refer to those formulaic expressions whose primary role is strategic rather than propositional in nature; they serve to guide the hearer through the discourse by semantically framing propositional information (e.g., *The main point is*), by facilitating turn exchanges (e.g., *May I interrupt for a moment?*), and by marking discourse boundaries (e.g., *That's all I have to say about that*). These functions facilitate the comprehension process for the hearer, allowing him or her to use top-down strategies in discourse processing. Because of their nature and the functions they serve, the acquisition of gambits is of interest both sociolinguistically and psycholinguistically. In this paper, gambits will be discussed from a sociolinguistic perspective, a psycholinguistic perspective, and in terms of the problems they present for foreign language learners.

A Sociolinguistic Perspective

One important sociolinguistic function of gambits is that they serve to enhance politeness in interactions in several ways. While gambits do not necessarily contain social messages designed to increase face-support (such as compliments do) or to reduce face threat (such as supportive moves in requests do) (Held, 1989), they are nevertheless polite because they facilitate conversational management and information processing (Edmondson & House, 1981). Politeness, according to Fraser (1990), is doing what is appropriate for the situation; it involves

mutual cooperation of the interlocutors. Each participant demonstrates consideration for the others by abiding by the terms of a conversational contract, thereby doing what is expected of them by the other interlocutors. As mentioned earlier, the use of gambits is hearer supportive; they make it easier for the hearer to process the discourse by providing them with opportunities for top-down processing. Therefore, when gambits are not used appropriately in the expected places, their non-use or inappropriate use can be seen as nonsupportive. The processing load on the hearer is increased, and the speaker is likely to be viewed as uncooperative and impolite (Edmondson & House, 1981).

Gambits also serve a politeness function in that they can be used to encode social status indirectly, which in many cases would be considered impolite if directly encoded. This is done by simultaneously encoding a social message indirectly along with a more direct propositional message. Keller (1981) provides an example: The gambit, *Here's what we'll do*, can simultaneously signal the speaker's wish to keep the turn, state a plan for action, and assert a position of leadership.

That gambits serve a politeness function is evident in that their use typically increases when the speaker is imposing on or disagreeing with the hearer. Research in conversational analysis has demonstrated that hesitators (e.g., *well*, *um*) are more frequent in dispreferred responses (e.g. rejections of offers, disagreements with assertions). These hesitator gambits are not meaningless speech production errors, but signal social meaning (Davidson, 1984; Pomerantz, 1984).

Psycholinguistic Interest

Gambits are of interest from a psycholinguistic perspective for a number of reasons. Like other speech formulas, they offer insight into psycholinguistic processes such as fluency, automaticity, and noticing. Fluency in the speech of foreign language learners has been associated with automaticity. More automatic speech is more fluent (Schmidt, 1992). When speech is fluent, the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and production are functioning easily and efficiently (Lennon, 1990). The use of speech formulas (including gambits) facilitates the fluent production of speech. The formula is learned, stored, and retrieved as a single unit or chunk. As such, it is produced in a steady stream of speech unmarked by hesitations and pauses (Pawley & Syder, 1983).

Since gambits and formulas are learned as chunks, they also add to the native-like quality of the learner's speech

because the appropriate sequences of words (i.e., the fixed formulas and lexicalized sentence stems) contribute to the appearance of competence in the language (Pawley & Syder, 1983). Conversely, when foreign language learners use a non-routinized sequence in a place where native speakers would use a routine formula, the speech calls attention to itself as non-native in quality (Edmondson, House, Kasper & Stemmer 1984). Learners who are able to utilize these series of chunks will give the appearance of fluency in the language, which will in turn provide them with more opportunities to converse with native speakers, thereby increasing (and perhaps improving) the quality of the input (Wong Fillmore, 1979). It would follow, then, that learners who have mastered some conversational gambits will give the appearance of fluency in the language.

Gambits, like other speech formulas, occur with greater frequency than more unique and creative utterances. As a result, they can be produced automatically. However, their automatic quality and their low propositional content make them less cognitively salient and more likely to go unnoticed (Verschueren, 1981; DuFon, 1992). Noticing is essential in order for pragmatic formulas (such as gambits) to be acquired (Schmidt, 1993). Therefore, gambits, even though they may occur frequently in the input, will not be acquired if they are not sufficiently perceptually salient to be noticed. Thus while gambit use may facilitate the development of fluency in the target language, the gambits themselves may be difficult to acquire because of their not being noticed by the learner.

Gambits in Language Learning

Even when noticed, however, appropriate use of gambits may not be easily acquired. The formulas themselves are relatively easy for learners to memorize (Davies, 1987), but even when a gambit appears to have an equivalent form in the target language, it may not be equivalent to the source language gambit in terms of its functional meanings or the contextual features related to its use. Learners typically begin to use formulas before they fully understand their functional meanings and relevant contextual features (Davies, 1987; Richards & Sukwiwat, 1983; Schmidt, 1993), and therefore are likely to err in gambit use even when the form itself has been mastered.

Studies of learners' use of gambits have indicated that gambits occur much less frequently in learners' interlanguage than in either the native language or the target language. Furthermore, there is much less variety in learners' gambit use as compared with that of native speakers. Rather learners tend

to overuse some gambits and underuse others. They adopt a few favorite gambits which they use extensively (even in situations where they are not appropriate) while they underuse other gambits. Some gambits do not appear in the learner's interlanguage even when there is a direct translation equivalent (Edmondson & House, 1981; Faerch & Kasper, 1984; Wildner-Bassett, 1984).

In summary then, gambits are speech formulas which serve to guide the hearer through the discourse. They are of interest sociolinguistically (because of their politeness value as hearer supportive devices) and psycholinguistically (because of their relationship to fluency, automaticity, and noticing). Even when noticed, they typically are problematic for the learner because of their nonequivalence in terms of form, functional meaning, and relevant contextual variables in the two languages.

To date, studies of gambit acquisition and use have involved Germanic languages--German, Danish, and English. This study, in contrast, will explore the acquisition and use of gambits by beginning level adult classroom learners of Indonesian as a foreign language. The gambits will be studied in terms of their forms, their functions, and the contextual variables related to their use. The following research questions will be addressed. 1) To what extent are gambits taught in the classroom? 2) How does student output compare with input in terms of gambit types, gambit length, frequency of use, and function?

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were a class of eighteen students enrolled in Indonesian 101 at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Most were native speakers of various dialects of English (American, New Zealand, Singaporean); one student, however, was a native speaker of French. The class had been in session for about two months at the time of the data collection. The class met for fifty minutes five days per week. The students had little exposure to the Indonesian language outside of class, therefore it was assumed that most of their learning took place within the context of the class (i.e., the class itself, language laboratory work, and homework). On occasion, however, they did have opportunities to speak with native speakers of Indonesian outside of class. The Indonesian teachers usually organized several parties per semester; they invited students from Indonesia to these parties, in part so that the students of

Indonesian could practice their conversational skills with native speakers.

The teacher of the class was a native of Indonesia, a fluent speaker of Indonesian, and a highly qualified and respected teacher who was well-liked by her students. All skills--listening, speaking, reading, and writing--were given attention, as the teacher wanted the students to become fluent in both oral and written language.

Materials

The teacher used the required textbook, *Beginning Indonesian through self-instruction* by Wolff, Oetomo, and Fietkiewicz (1986). The book relies heavily on dialogs and pattern practice, but the teacher used the book only for the dialogs. During the data collection portion of this study, the students did the dialogs in chapter 6 of the text book, *Omong-omong dengan teman* [Conversation with a friend]. These dialogs dealt with two friends who took a bus to the bookstore in order to buy a textbook. The teacher also used authentic supplementary materials for reading and conversation practice. The supplementary materials used during the time of the study were unrelated to the chapter and dealt with movies and movie ratings and with ordering food in a restaurant.

Procedures for Data Collection

The class was observed for five consecutive days while one entire chapter was being taught. The classes were tape recorded with an audiocassette recorder. Since many of the opportunities to use language creatively occurred during small group activities and pair work, students were taped during these times as well as during the large group activities. Since it was not possible to tape record all pairs, one student was selected to be followed during pair work. In this way, there was some control over differences in performance which might have occurred as a result of differences in the task or in the materials used. At the same time, the student interacted with different partners, so there were data from other students as well.

Procedures for Data Analysis

The audiotapes for each of the five classes were listened to, and the gambits were transcribed each time they were heard. Only those portions of the class in which the teacher was talking or in which the students were working on an activity that allowed them to generate their own creative utterances were included in

the analysis. (In other words, dialog repetition was eliminated in the students' gambit count). Along with the transcription of each gambit, some of the surrounding text and/or notes regarding its function or syntactic position were also written down. All the teacher gambits were written in one column, the student gambits in another. No attempt was made to distinguish between gambit use by individual students; rather all student gambits were listed together. The first six chapters of the textbook were also examined to see which gambits the students had been exposed to via the materials up until that point. A list was made of the gambits introduced in each chapter.

The gambits in the three data sets (textbook, teacher input, and student output) were then analyzed in order to determine: 1) the number of gambit types in each data set, 2) a comparison of the three data sets in terms of gambit length in number of words, 3) a classification of gambits by function and their distribution in the speech of the teacher and students, and 4) the number of gambit tokens in the teacher's and students' speech and a comparison of rank orders of the ten most frequently used gambits by the teacher and by the students.

Finally, a native speaker of Indonesian was asked to comment on the gambits used in the classroom in order to qualitatively evaluate the students' use in terms of their form, function, and situational appropriateness. The native speaker was an experienced EFL teacher (particularly in the area of grammar), has nearly completed a master's degree in ESL, is working toward a PhD in linguistics, and has worked as a classroom observer on a teacher training project for teachers of Indonesian as a foreign language. He was given an explanation of what gambits are and the functions they serve, and was shown some examples of gambits from Keller (1981). He was then shown the list of gambits which appeared in the study category by category (i.e., backchannels, turntakers etc.). Each category was first explained, and then he was asked in a non-directive way whether he had any comments on any of them in terms of native speaker or nonnative speaker use. He was then asked specific questions about certain gambits in terms of their forms, functions, and contextual variables. In other words, he was not asked to analyze the data obtained in this study in context, but to provide information regarding the relationship between the forms, the functions, and the contextual variables of various gambit types.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teaching of Gambits

During the week of observation, no gambits were explicitly taught. That is, the teacher did not call attention to any particular gambit to explain it in terms of its form, function, or relevant contextual variables. She did, however, discuss the meaning and/or use of some vocabulary items which are elements contained in some of the gambits (e.g., *bagus*, *coba*, *sebenstar*).

Gambit Types

The count of gambit forms in the two main input sources, the textbook and the teacher, indicated that a total of 98 gambit types were present in the input: A total of 48 different gambit forms were used in the textbook and a total of 70 different forms were used by the teacher. Twenty (20) gambit forms appeared in the input via both the textbook dialogs and the teacher; thus 28 gambits appeared in the text, but were not used by the teacher, and 50 were used by the teacher which had not yet appeared in the text. The students used a total of 31 gambit types, less than half as many as they had been exposed to by the teacher. Of these, 24 were present in the input--either in the textbook or in the teacher's speech during the observation week; 7 student gambits, however were not in the textbook, nor were they used by the teacher during that week.

Length

The gambits were examined in the three data sets for length in words. For all three groups the mode was one; gambits most often consisted of a single lexeme. For the students, 22 out of 31 gambits (71%) were a single lexeme, 6 (19%) consisted of two words, and 3 (10%) consisted of three words. Likewise, the teacher's gambits were, short; 32 (46%) were one word, 29 (41%) were two words, 7 (10%) were three words, and 2 (3%) were more than three words. Her longest gambit was a lexicalized sentence stem containing three fixed words and four slots: *Sekarang coba (title) (name) dengan/sama (title) (name) [Now try (title) (name) with (title) (name)]*. This formula was used when calling on two students to do a dialog in front of the class. In the textbook, 24 (50%) of the 48 gambits were a single word, 7 (35%) were two words, 6 (13%) were three words, and 1 (2%) was four words. For a summary of gambit length according to user, see Table 1 in the appendix.

Functions

Once the forms had been counted, gambits were classified according to their functions using Keller's (1981) and Faerch & Kasper's (1982, 1984) systems as a guide. Six major categories were identified: backchannels, turn-takers, turn-keepers, turn-givers, turn-passers, and semantic framers. For the number of gambits in each category for each data set, see Table 2. A definition of each category and subcategory follows.

Backchannels were those signals given by the hearer to acknowledge the preceding utterance of the interlocutor, without taking over the turn. They were subclassified into two groups: 1) the receipt, which was a neutral response (e.g., *ahhah* [*uhhuh*]), and 2) the exclaim, which was more emotive (e.g., *Waduh!* [*Gosh!*]). Most of the tokens classified as receipts could also be used as exclams depending on intonation. Some exclams, such as *Wah!* [*Wow!*] and *Waduh!* [*Gosh!*] were inherently nonneutral and fell exclusively into the exclaim category as they would never be used as receipts.

Turn-takers were subdivided into two groups: starters (e.g., *O, O ya*) and interrupters (e.g., *Ma'af* [*Excuse me*]). Starters were particles used to signal the beginning of a turn. Interrupters were used to simultaneously take a turn and to interrupt the flow of discourse in some way.

Turn-keepers were classified into three subgroups: asides, conjunctions, and hesitators. Asides were used by the speaker to interrupt his or her own message to the hearer; in this study asides only included messages addressed to the hearer (e.g., *tunggu dulu sebentar* [*wait a moment*]), but could conceivably include instances of talking to oneself in order to hold the floor (e.g., *Where did I put that? Oh here it is.*). Conjunctions were placed in this category when they were used to buy time rather than simply to connect two ideas (e.g., *dan* [*and*]). Admittedly, this was a subjective judgment that would probably not have yielded high inter-rater reliability. Hesitators were fillers used to hold the floor during speech planning activities (e.g., *uh* [*uh*]).

Turn-givers included appealers, call-ons, checkers, requests for repetition, and requests for clarification. Appealers were tag questions used at the end of turns to invite the hearer to respond to what had just been said (e.g., *betul?* [*right?*]). Their responses typically came in the form of backchannels. However, the use of an appealer does, in a sense, offer the turn to the interlocutor, who may respond by taking the floor in order to disagree, ask for clarification, etc. Call ons were gambits used to call on or name students to participate in the

discourse. Checkers were used by the speaker to check on the hearer's comprehension of what had just been said (e.g., *mengerti?* [*understand?*]), a gambit type that frequently occurs in foreign language classrooms. As the name suggests, requests for repetition were used to ask that a previous utterance be repeated; it was used when its speaker did not hear, did not remember, or did not understand what had been said by the speaker of the previous turn (e.g., *Ma'af* [*excuse me*]). Requests for clarification, on the other hand, were used by an interlocutor who did not fully understand what had just been said or who needed a rewording or additional information (e.g., *maksudnya?* [*what do you mean?*]).

Turn-passers were used by speakers when they did not wish to make a contribution after having been offered the floor (e.g., *saya tidak tahu* [*I don't know*]; *O biarlah* [*Oh never mind*]).

The last group, semantic framers, included conjunctions, markers, and underscorers. When a conjunction's primary function seemed to be to serve a discourse cohesive function (e.g., *jadi*, [*so/therefore*]), rather than a turnkeeping function, it was placed in the semantic framing category. Markers were used to mark major shifts in topic or activity. Markers such as (*baik* [*good/ok*]) tended to mark the end of an activity or topic, while (*sekarang* [*now*]) marked the beginning. Underscorers were used to focus the listener's attention on the point being made and give an indication of how it was to be taken (e.g., *kalau* [*as for*]; *saya rasa...* [*I feel...*]).

It should be noted that in some cases, gambits having similar forms fell into different functional groups. (e.g., *O maksud saya...* [*Oh what I mean(t)...*] vs. *Maksudnya?* [*What do you mean?*]), the former being an underscorer, the latter a request for clarification). In other cases, gambits having the same form were divided into different categories because they served different functions. For instance, *O* [*Oh*] served as a backchannel and as a starter. Therefore, the same form was repeated in the list. This was done in a few cases where the differences in function were really obvious. For example, *Ya* was sometimes used as an appealer; in those cases, it appeared as a question tag at the end of a sentence and was produced with rising intonation. In other cases, it served as a starter and occurred at the beginning of a sentence.

Gambit Use, Frequency, and Social Role

Gambit use was also compared by rank ordering the top 10 gambits in terms of frequency used by the teacher and the

top 10 used by the students. For this ranking, gambits with similar forms and functions were grouped together (e.g., (*Sudah? Sudah ya? Sudah siap ya?*, all used to mean, *Are you ready?* or *Have you finished?*) In table 3, it can be seen that there were differences in the gambit forms and functions used most frequently by the students and those used by the teacher. Although the first four gambits in the student's list also appeared in the teacher's list, the other six gambits in each list were different. This was probably related to the differences in their roles in the classroom. For example, the teacher had the power to change activity and allocate turns; therefore, it is not surprising that she had used many more gambits to mark shifts in the activities and to give turns to specific persons than the students did. In contrast, the students, who were less fluent, used more hesitators and backchannels than the teacher.

Learner Gambit Use in Terms of Form and Function

Students generated gambit forms that were not present in the input either in the textbook or in the teacher's speech during the week of observation. It is possible that some of the forms had been present in the teacher's speech earlier in the semester, but this is probably not true in all cases. Among these gambits were the forms: *saya tidak tahu* [*I don't know*], *dan sesudah* [*and afterwards*], and *Saya juga rasa* [*I also think*].

Saya tidak tahu was used appropriately by the students even though it was not used by the teacher. It may have been taught, or at least used, by the teacher earlier in the semester, or it may have been created by the students by combining the three words of the formula, all of which were present in the input during the week of observation. The expression is, of course, a very useful one for classroom learners. It is an easy formula for native English speakers learning Indonesian since it is literally translated as [*I not know*].

The form *dan sesudah* is used in Indonesian, but (according to the native speaker informant) is very formal and more likely to be used in writing. It is very unlikely that these learners acquired this gambit through reading formal material. It is more likely the result of transferring the formal equivalent from English (*and after*) into Indonesian. The appropriate form for more informal speech, however, would be (*se*)*sudah itu* [*after that*]. By using *dan sesudah*, the students were using a grammatical form which was an appropriate form in terms of semantic content, but was inappropriate for the situational context.

Saya juga rasa appeared to be the result of L1 influence. *I also think* is commonly used in English when adding more information on a topic, but its formal translation equivalent *saya juga rasa* was judged to be a non-native form by my Indonesian informant. Apparently this form is not used by native speakers of Indonesian, although *saya rasa* [*I think*] is.¹

Certain uses of gambits were considered appropriate to the classroom context, but not to situations outside the classroom. Learners, nevertheless, generalized the use of gambits learned in the classroom to situations outside. For example, *bagus* [*great*] as a backchannel was used by both teacher and students as a backchannel in the classroom context. However, according to my native speaker informant, it is not typically used by native speakers of Indonesian. He reported that when he had spoken with classroom learners of Indonesian, their use of *bagus* as a backchannel cue struck him as strange and somewhat comical.

Likewise the use of *Mengerti?* [*Understand?*] and *Tahu* ____? [*You know* ____?] are appropriate for classroom use. However, when these forms are used in certain contexts outside of class between equals or to persons of higher status, they sound impolite. It is often more appropriate to use the form, *Bisa dimengerti?* [lit. *Can it be understood?*]. Likewise, to ask for a repetition using *sekali lagi* [*one more time*] is appropriate only in the classroom setting.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, these students had already acquired a small repertoire of gambits, and were using them in their classroom discourse. The number of gambits they were using, however, was only about one third of those they had been exposed to. This finding is consistent with previous studies of gambit use in second and foreign language contexts. Also consistent with previous studies is the finding that the students both overuse and underuse gambit forms.

Student gambits were short in length, but so were most teacher gambits. Since most were so short in length, consisting of only a single word, they did not add much to the appearance of fluency. Sometimes gambits were strung together to form longer gambits, but these usually involved the addition of the particles *O* or *Ya* to a one to two word gambit.

Differences in terms of the types and frequency of gambits used by teacher and students could, to some extent, be attributed to differences in their roles. Other differences in form,

function, and the contexts in which they were applied appeared to be related to cross-linguistic influence. Another problem which may confront the learners would be the application of classroom language outside the classroom context. A number of gambits associated with classroom routines appeared to be only appropriate within the classroom context, not in social activities with members of the target culture outside of class.

This paper is intended to provide additional information on the acquisition of gambits in particular and the acquisition of pragmatics in general, focusing on learners of Indonesian as a foreign language. However, any conclusions in this paper must be regarded as tentative since the sample size on which the data are based is very limited in terms of the number of subjects, range of contexts, and native speaker judgements.

Additional work in this area is clearly needed. From a practical point of view, it would be helpful to study gambit use by native speakers in order to identify gambit forms, functions, and the appropriate contexts for their use. From a theoretical point of view, it would be particularly interesting to identify and investigate Indonesian gambits which do not have close equivalents in English and which seem especially troublesome for learners, since they may be less likely to be noticed, understood, or acquired. In addition, developmental studies of gambit acquisition could provide insight into the role of psycholinguistic variables such as fluency, automaticity, and noticing in the acquisition process.

Notes

¹In a formal speech by a native speaker, I observed a similar form but with different syntax, i.e., *saya rasa juga...* The same speaker also used a similar form, but with a different verb, e.g., *saya juga kenal...* (*I know also...*).

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1
GAMBIT LENGTH BY USER

Source	Number of Words				Total
	1	2	3	3+	
Textbook	24 50%	17 35%	6 13%	1 2%	48
Teacher	32 46%	29 41%	7 10%	2 3%	70
Student	22 71%	6 19%	3 10%	0 0%	31

TABLE 2
GAMBIT USE BY CATEGORY AND USER

	Textbook	Teacher	Students
Backchannels			
Receipts & Exclaims	11	14	9
Turn-takers			
Starters	3	4	4
Interrupters	1	1	0
Turn Passers	2	1	2
Turnkeepers			
Asides	5	1	0
Conjunctions	1	1	3
Hesitators	1	1	2
Turngivers			
Appealers	1	6	2
Call Ons	0	3	0
Checkers	0	8	1
Clarification Requests	3	2	1
Request for Repetitions	2	2	2
Semantic framers			
Conjunctions	2	4	1
Markers	5	17	1
Underscorers	11	5	3

TABLE 3

**TEACHER AND STUDENT GAMBITS
IN TERMS OF FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE**

TEACHER INPUT			STUDENT OUTPUT	
1.	Ya? [A]	211	1.	Um/uh [H] 72
2.	Sekarang [M] (group)	77	2.	Ya? [A] 38
3.	Ya [S]	48	3.	O [S] 32
4.	Bagaimana? [RR/RC]	39	4.	Ya [S] 20
5.	Sudah? [M] (group)	34	5.	Dan [C] 19
6.	Kalau [M/U] (group)	28	6.	Bagus [R/E] 13
7.5.	Ok [S]	23	7.5.	Saya rasa [U] (group) 12
7.5.	Baik [M] (group)	23	7.5.	O [U] 12
9.	O [S]	22	9.5.	Baiklah [U] 9
10.	Um [H]	21	9.5.	Ma'af [RR] 9

[R/E] = Receipt/Exclaim

[S] = Starter

[C] = Conjunction

[H] = Hesitater

[A] = Appealer

[RC] = Request for Clarification

[RR] = Request for repetition

[M] = Marker

[U] = Underscorer