RICH LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
AND YOUNG LEARNERS' LITERACY SKILLS IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed at developing rich language learning environment to help elementary school students develop their literacy skills in English. Shortage of professional English teachers in primary school, limited time allocation, as well as the lack of tools and facilities that support English language teaching and learning for young learners had resulted in students' low literacy skills in English. It was tried out in six primary schools across Bali involving 12 teachers and 520 students. The data were collected through questionnaires, observation, interview, English literacy tests, and students' literacy journals. Research finds that young learners should have the opportunity to learn by doing without too much intervention so that a natural process of learning could occur. The product comprises multiple literacy experiences in the form of five different texts. The findings reveal that the readability of the material is in the category of high. The systematic exposures of these materials to beginner learners of English have been proven to have the significant impact on their literacy skills. The highest improvement is found in word level (87,1%), followed by sentence level (56,2%), and discourse level (46,8%). The improvements are all confirmed at the significance level of 0,05. The research also finds that RLLE has the positive impact on the development of self-directed learning skills.

Keywords: learning environment, rich language learning environment, literacy skills, English for young learners, self-directed learning skill

INTRODUCTION

Primary English Language Teaching (PELT) is currently growing very rapidly throughout the world. According to Whitehead (2007), English language today has become a global commodity that many countries in the world are investing substantial funds to improve the standard quality of English language learning in the schools. Hayes (2007) has further stated that English in primary school is not just a mere subject, but it is already regarded as a component of basic education. However, in Indonesian education, English is not compulsory at the primary school level but rather a local content curriculum since 1994. It means that the inclusion of English into the curriculum is dependent upon the actual need of the community where the school is located.

In Bali where tourism becomes the major source of local income (Jennaway, 2002), English is needed for human-resources intending to seek employment in tourism-related businesses and enterprises (Artini, 2006). For this reason, the community had the positive perceptions about English language and considered it as a prestigious language to learn (Artini, 2006). Many parents send their children to the primary schools that offer an English program with an expectation that the children will have a strong foundation for language proficiency in the future. In most public schools, English lessons start at 4th grade, and the teaching and learning process only occurs inside the classroom for approximately 35 minutes in a week. Due to limited English teachers specializing in PELT, it is a common practice that the homeroom teacher is requested to teach the foreign language (Copland & Garton, 2014).

Similar to China, in Bali, English may be taught by the teacher of other subjects or an English teacher who has to teach across schools (Hu, 2007). In addition, Sikki, et al., (2013) have found that 52% of 200 English teachers surveyed in primary schools in Indonesia have very low English language competence. Shortage of English teachers for young learners, limited English, insufficient learning tools, and facilities, as well as very short time for exposure to good English materials, will hinder children' progress in literacy skills (Akazawa, 2016). This infers that a serious effort should be made to compensate for those problems.

Yelland (2006) has suggested that teaching English for young learners should be supported by a rich language environment so that the young EFL (English as First Language) learners can learn naturally from real or meaningful contexts. In addition, according to Brewster,

et al., (2007), there should be a way to maintain students' feeling of enthusiasm. These ideas are accommodated in the present research, in which a Rich Language Learning Environment (RLLE) is created to support the PELT in Indonesia in general, or in Bali in particular. The provision of RLLE materials is also in line with Watanabe & Caprio (1999) for whom a good EFL instruction should not only take place in the classroom alone. Indeed, if done correctly, learning English in primary school is a strategic step to start improving human resources through formal education (Mitchell & Myles, as cited in Hayes, 2007). There are several reasons why it is considered important to start introducing English as a foreign language in primary schools. First, from the age perspective, the young learners are considered having more flexible 'tool' for learning a language (Long, 1990; Ara, 2009; Damar, et al., 2013). Second, the demands of English in the society result in positive attitudes towards learning the foreign language (Lamb, 2003; Artini, 2006; 2009b).

The importance of English to be taught from an early age has also been widely discussed by experts. Even though the debate on 'the younger, the better' has not yet settled, there are strong reasons why it is beneficial to start a foreign language learning at the early age. Sarem & Hamidi (2012) for example, they have discussed the need to take into account the children age for the effective foreign language program in the school. Similarly with what Moyer (2014) has emphasized that the age at which an individual is first exposed to a foreign language affects long-term outcome. When exposed to EFL at the young age, children rapidly become bilingual and outperformed the monolingual counterparts in the linguistic aspects of the language (deBot, 2014). This empirical evidence supports the growing number of Asian countries that include teaching English as a foreign language into their primary school curriculum.

RLLE materials developed in this research are underlined by some related research evidence. Scott & Ytreberg (2004) have found that effective learning needs adequate supporting materials in order to maximize learners' ability and achievement. As far as literacy skill is concerned, the supporting materials should provide various experiences to deal with different types of texts (Winch et al., 2006), from which children are motivated to read and write (Butler & Turbill, 1984). Variations of printed materials also need to be supported by variation of media. When young learners find the texts and the media interesting and eye-catching, they can be expected to subconsciously develop their curiosity to learn more (Liu, 2010). Rass & Holzman (2010) have further asserted that limitation of time and facilities to learn only inside the classroom in a public primary school will result in conventional teaching that hardly involved learners in activities that built their reading and writing skills. Therefore, there must be additional learning sources that keep their enthusiasm and motivation to learn English. These empirical evidence inspire the research and development that aims at creating an RLLE model for helping young EFL learners to progress with their literacy skills in English.

METHODS

This study follows the development model of Dick and Carey (1990), which consists of eight steps: needs analysis, instructional analysis, analyzing learner and the context of learning, writing instructional goals, developing assessment instruments, developing learning strategies, developing and selecting learning materials, and designing and implementing the summative evaluation. The subjects are 10 English teachers and 400 students in grade 4, 5, and 6 from five schools (in the first year), and 12 teachers and 520 students from six schools (in the second year). The research instruments include questionnaires, interview guide, observation sheet, English literacy tests, and students' literacy journals.

Prior to the first year implementation, the developed RLLE materials are validated by two expert judges who had an expertise in the field of TEYL (Teaching English fo Young Learners). The materials (in the form of texts and images) are then displayed and replaced periodically and systematically to give the young learners the chance to observe, read, and write their choice of materials during their own convenient time. Such materials are equipped with a literacy journal system, where each student is given the freedom to do activities such as writing a word, copying a sentence or other written assignments. The displayed materials are created in such a way so that they attract students' attention to look, observe, read and do something in their journals. To determine the impact of the displayed RLLE materials, English literacy pre-test and post-test are administered in both years, and the differences are analyzed using t-test formula.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first three steps in Dick and Carey Model (need analysis, instructional analysis, and analysis of learners and learning contexts) are carried out during the first month of the project (Dick & Carey, 1990). The findings confirm the limitation of facilities in learning English, including the availability of English textbooks, supporting resources, and instructional media. The information about the curriculum, types of learning activities, teacher qualifications and instructional strategies in the classroom are obtained through direct interviews with the school principals and the English teachers. All the schools that observed allocate short time for in-class activities and no other activities are available outside the classroom. The learners do not have any other opportunity to satisfy their curiosity about the English language. It is also found that students only learn from one textbook and one workbook so when the class ended, the learning process is also ended. English books used in the schools are different from one school to the others. However, the physical look of the books selected are similar. They are black and white prints (not colorful) and are printed on low-quality paper, maybe to make the price affordable. The informal interviews with some of the students in Grade 4, 5 and 6 at five schools, it has found that they are interested in learning English. They want to learn more new words because they often hear English used in their environment, for example on television, radio, advertisement, and other sources. When several English picture books are shown to them, they immediately huddle and want to see and read the books. This demonstrated that primary school students in Bali have an interest and motivation in learning English.

The next step is to write instructional objectives, develop assessment instruments, learning strategies, and the materials for the RLLE. The major purpose of these steps is to formulate the objectives for developing the RLLE models and design the format and content. There are five types of texts which are developed in accordance with the theory of Multiple Literacy Experiences (Winch et al., 2006). The five types are comprised of (a) Topical Vocabulary (list of

words related to the corresponding topics); (b) Everyday Expressions (short and simple expressions commonly used/ needed in children daily life); (c) Grammar Focus (exposure to forms); (d) Language Games (extensive practice with English language through challenging and fun activities); and (e) Times for Stories (stories that enrich EFL learning in meaningful contexts).

The five types of texts are created to closely follow the content coverage of the curriculum. After every lesson, the relevant materials to the topic are displayed on the display board for a week. Thus, children can look back and at the same time enrich the material they have learned inside the classroom. This induced self-directed learning to occur without too much intervention from the teacher. Additionally, children have the freedom to choose the time and text type they would like to look at or read and decided on which of those that they would like to work on in their literacy journal. They could show their work to the teachers who are ready at any time to check and stamp the journal to reinforce students to keep learning from the display. These five types of RLLE texts in this study are developed regarding the syllabus of English subject of Grades 4, 5, and 6. The materials are meant to support (complementary) and enrich (enrichment) the in-class materials. The illustrative pictures are compiled from various sources such as the internet, mass media, and specially made or created under a specified topic. The graphic design is carefully planned and is created in such a way so that they attracted the attention of the students to look and read. The materials are periodically and systematically displayed at a strategic spot around the classroom. Each school is provided with three display boards, and each is placed in front classrooms of Grade 4, 5, and 6. Each week the materials on the board were replaced. The students voluntarily fill in their journals with activities that interest them the most. Thus, it is not hard to imagine that students become accustomed to develop curiosity, self-motivated, and have a passion for independent learning outside the classroom.

All texts and illustrations are purposely designed taking into account the font sizes and styles, illustrative pictures or images, and color composition so that the meaning could be directly understood by children just by looking at the display. Prior to the display, the content is validated by two expert judges who are the senior lecturers in English Education Department. The content validation analysis results in the score of 4.318 which according to the quality classification (Nurkencana & Sunartana in Kusuma, 2012) belongs to the high category. This indicates that the materials are ready for the first trial.

At the evaluation stage, the impact of RLLE material exposure on young learners' literacy skills in English is analyzed. The impact is measured through literacy skill pretest and post-test. The test material includes three levels of text, namely (1) the level of words (writing random word, selecting a word, labeling a picture); (2) the level of the sentence (unscrambling sentences, filling in the blanks, matching half sentences); and (3) a simple discourse (writing a simple description guided by a picture, picture series, or questions). From the results of the pretests conducted in the first year, it can be concluded that students in Grade 4, 5, and 6 have very low literacy skills in English (the mean score is 22,6 out of 100). For example, most of the 4th graders are unable to write down the names of the days even though they could easily mention them. They misspelled words, for example, they write *Fritdy, Fride, Frydy* for Friday. This is due to limit the in-class time for the students to pay a good attention on how a word is spelled in English. Ability to spell correctly is surely not the main goal in learning English as a foreign language at beginner level. However, systematic exposures to the English language will provide opportunities for young learners to have a careful look at meaning and use, including the spelling.

Based on the observations on the implementation of RLLE model in the schools, the students demonstrate enthusiasm to learn independently. They huddle in front of a display board before the lesson is begun at the recessed time and before returning home. It is observable that all students are actively and voluntarily involved in independent learning either by silent reading or working on their journals as seen in the Figure 1.

Figure 1 Students' Enthusiasm in Doing Independent Learning

They, for example, label a picture, fill in a speech bubble with an expression, or completed crossword puzzles. These activities encourage the students to become autonomous learners who worked independently to satisfy their desire to learn new things. They self-directed their learning and chose the materials that they perceived as the most interesting. As a matter of fact, self-directed learning skill is the key to long life education, which according to Michie (2011) is a powerful strategy to achieve learning success.

The exposure to RLLE materials in the first year has shown the positive impact on students' motivation to learn English. The motivation to do self-directed learning activities has been proven to have the positive impact on students' ability in reading and writing in English. The comparison between pre-test and post-test on literacy skills in the first year reveals that the 4 to 5 weeks exposure to RLLE materials has significantly improved students' literacy skills in English, as seen in Table.

The highest significant improvement occurs at the word level where the increase of the average score of Grade 4, 5, and 6 from five schools is 87,1%. Meanwhile, the improvement in the ability to order words into sentences and to write appropriate expressions is at the average of 56,2%, and the ability to write a short discourse was 46,8%. The highest average score in vocabulary level is likely to do with the clear presentation of words and meaning through pictures. This makes easier for the students to remember the words and its meaning, as well as how to spell it. This kind of learning experience hardly occurs in the regular classroom where vocabulary is commonly introduced through mechanical drill activity in which the teacher pronounces the words out loud, and the students repeat after the teacher. The first year data corpus also indicates that lower yet significant improvement in literacy skills occur in

sentence and discourse levels. This is understandable since sentence and discourse that are increasingly complex. It requires the students to focus on many things. The higher improvement in sentence level in comparison to discourse level obviously shows that the more complex the text is, the more difficult and the longer time needed to achieve. However, the fact that literacy skills in English significantly improves despite the shorter time of RLLE exposure is an indication that the provision of RLLE materials in the form of words, sentences, and discourses attract attention, increase motivation, and evoke the dynamic qualities of the children to learn optimally (Artini, 2009a).

The second year experiment lasts for 12 weeks. Principally, the material does not change much since it already has a high level of quality. Minor revisions include simplifying the instructions and adding more examples so that it is easier for the students to learn independently. The research consistently finds the students' high motivation to learn from the displayed materials. Students' independence in learning could be observed from the choice of work they decided to do. RLLE provides text variations that made the students have the options to learn. This is in accordance with Berk and Winsler's idea as cited in Cook (2001). It has mentioned that a teacher should be sensitive regarding the learning needs of the students by providing learning materials that match their interests and learning progress. Elementary school teachers need to have the ability to create supportive and quality learning environment that supports quality learning (Scott & Ytreberg, 2004). The RLLE materials, indeed, make students have the freedom to choose for themselves what they want to do and then proudly show their work to their friends and teacher.

After displaying RLLE material for 12 weeks, the results of pre-test and post-test are compared. The comparison is displayed in Figure 2.

Table Comparison of Pre and Post Test Literacy Class 4, 5, 6 SD in the First Year

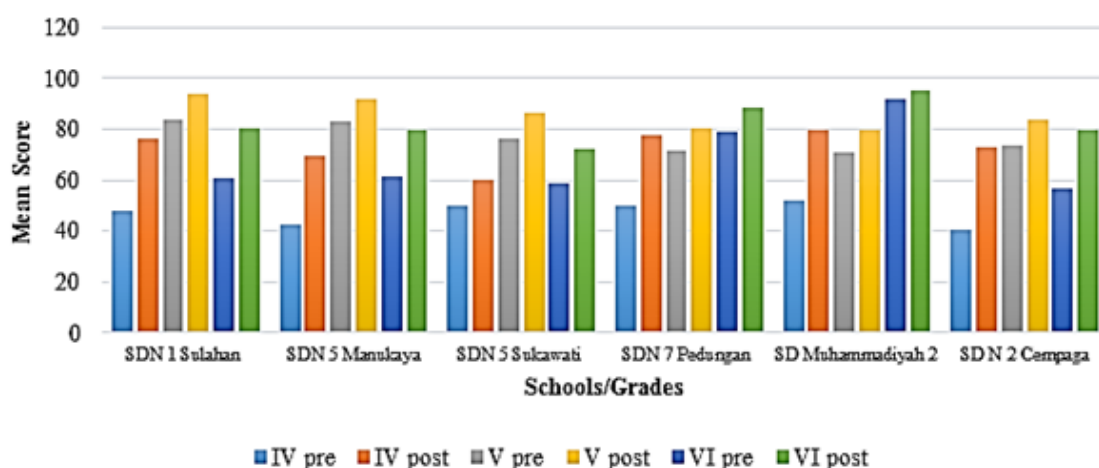| Schools		Average Scores of *Pre Test* & *Post Test on* Literacy skills (0-100)								
		Vocabulary			Sentences/Expressions			Simple Composition		
		G 4	*G 5*	*G 6*	*G 4*	*G 5*	*G 6*	*G 4*	*G 5*	*G 6*
SDN 1	Pre-test	33,6	43,7	23,0	22,4	38,1	26,0	9,3	39,0	25,8
Sulahan	Post-test	57,2	59,4	50,2	30,7	45,3	40,2	22,1	47,1	40,3
SDN 5	Pre-test	6,9	20,2	12,3	17,6	30,4	36,3	20,0	32,8	29,5
Manukaya	Post-test	37,1	40,7	32,4	27,2	34,4	38,1	28,2	40,2	36,4
SDN 5	Pre-test	26,8	22,8	32,8	12,4	21,6	14,4	20,2	24,2	28,2
Sukawati	Post-test	40,5	39,4	44,4	22,1	27,6	20,2	30,1	41,3	41,1
SDN 7	Pre-test	26,2	28,8	22,2	20,4	22,6	24,6	28,4	29,1	28,2
Pedungan	Post-test	46,2	45,1	40,7	30,5	34,1	25,6	29,9	39,2	35,6
SD Muham-	Pre-test	12,2	20,1	10,2	18,4	20,2	19,2	16,8	18,2	5,2
madiyah 2	Post-test	31,1	40,4	33,1	20,6	34,9	27,1	22,2	24,2	16,7
SDN 2	Pre-test	24,2	30,1	20,2	28,4	28,2	19,8	26,8	28,2	15,2
Cempaga	Post-test	40,8	54,2	39,8	48,2	48,6	43,4	44,2	41,1	39,9
Average	Pre-test	21,6	27,6	20,1	19,9	26,9	23,4	20,3	28,6	22,0
	Post-test	42,2	46,5	40,1	30,1	34,2	37,5	29,5	38,9	35,0
Improvement		93,4%	68,5%	99,5%	51,3%	57,1%	60,3%	45.3%	36,0%	59,1%

Results of Literacy Skills Tests

Figure 2 Comparison between the Results of the Pre-test and Post-tests of English Literacy Skills
in the Second Year of RLLE Project

The 12 weeks of RLLE exposure results in consistently significant improvement of literacy skills in English in Grades 4, 5, and 6 in all schools involved. In Grade 4, the increase is from the mean score of 47,1 in the pre-test to 72,7 in the post-test; in Grade 5, from 76,5 to 86,1; and in Grade 6 from 68,1 to 82,7. By t-test, all of these differences are significant at 5% significance level, which indicates that exposure to RLLE materials significantly improves primary school students' literacy skills in English. It is undeniable that the regular classroom teaching and learning may contribute to the improvement in the literacy skills in English. However, given that the target achievement of learning English in primary schools is not the reading and writing but only on language accompanying action or the ability to respond to speech acts through action (Depdiknas, 2009). Then it is explainable that most of that improvement is caused by the exposure of English language through RLLE materials. Their preferred activities do not only help them improve their literacy skills in English but also train them about how to learn in general and how to learn a foreign language in particular.

CONCLUSIONS

In the latest education reforms in Indonesia that are marked by the launching of Curriculum 2013, English is not included in primary school curriculum. Meanwhile, the society is increasingly aware of the importance to start learning English since the primary school age so that their children have strong English foundation for further education, as well as to successfully compete in the labor market in the future. Given that English is considered as local content in the curriculum with very limited allocated lesson time, learning activities generally take place in a conventional way (i.e. teacher-centered) and are led to achieve cognitive development. The products of this research are one of the alternative solutions to the problem of PELT

in Indonesia. The provision of RLLE in school premises can be expected to strengthen children's motivation and basic skills in English. Systematic exposures to the materials do not only improve literacy skills in English but also interest and motivation to learn the foreign language, as well as to build self-directed learning habit that will keep the children eager to learn autonomously.

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