

READ FOR PLEASURE AND ACQUIRE THE LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Despite overwhelming research evidence buttressing the power of reading (Krashen, 2004), reading for pleasure – widely known as Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) – is still excluded in the mandated national curriculum for English language teaching in Indonesia. In fact, critical voices (channeled primarily via scholarly published articles) demanding the inclusion of this kind of reading in the curriculum are almost non-existent. This shows that the power of reading in general and FVR in particular, is not acknowledged by Indonesian scholars, politicians, and language teaching practitioners. This article argues that the sluggish improvement of literacy in this country is due to the fact that English language teaching is geared to conscious learning rather than to acquisition of the language as well as to the exclusive focus on heavy and ‘serious’ literature. This article offers alternative English language pedagogy, one that is not only pleasant for the students, but also helps facilitate literacy development in a powerful way. Implications of this alternative pedagogy are discussed.

Keywords: The power of reading; free voluntary reading; English language teaching; literacy development.

INTRODUCTION

With the dominance of English language as the language of technology, politics, and economy, there is always a strong desire for non-native English countries to learn it either through school curriculum or informal institutions offering English language courses. The most conspicuous are Korea, China, Taiwan, and Japan. And Indonesia is no exception. All these countries have been suffering from what is dubbed “English fever”.

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In a country like Indonesia, for instance, where English is taught as one mandatory school subject, the goal of teaching English is geared not to the acquisition, but to the learning of the language. That is, English is taught and learnt for the sake of preparing students to pass both school and national exams. This grade-oriented English teaching has made it mandatory for teachers to teach language rules to their students, and for students to learn the rules consciously so as to pass the exam with a good grade. Such a pedagogical practice is based on the Skill-Building Hypothesis, which claims that language rules are learnt consciously and then made “automatic” through output practice (Krashen, 1989; 2004b).

Despite major attacks leveled against it (Krashen, 2004c), the practice of teaching English using direct instruction and skill building is still favored in Indonesia. Furthermore, learning spellings and vocabulary by conscious memorization is prevalent in formal and informal school in Indonesia.

In this article, I will argue that the persisting practice of using direct instruction and the exposure to heavy reading materials to early schooling result in sluggish improvement of the student’s literacy skills. I will also attempt to show that efforts to bolster enthusiasm for reading have been ineffective due to ignorance of the research on free voluntary reading.

WRONG PATH LEADS TO PAIN NOT TO PLEASURE

But, what does it take to acquire English in particular and language in general? Learning grammatical rules? Memorizing vocabulary and idiomatic expressions? Learning how to spell words correctly? Research has consistently shown that direct instruction is of limited value; consciously learned rules do not “transfer” to fluent language use. Furthermore, language is too complex to be learnt and taught.

As a result of direct instruction, people do master some rules of grammar, learn some vocabulary, and learn to spell a number of words correctly, but the impact of direct instruction is not long-lasting. Because of their mastery of the elements of language, students may reasonably do well on examinations, but over a period of time they forget what they have learnt and are unable to use it for communicative purposes.

My observation has revealed that the majority of students are loath to study language rules and memorize vocabulary lists. Many of them feel distressed when their teachers introduce grammatical terminology, which are not meaningful to them. It is quite ironic that upon the completion of their grammar classes, the majority of students, even those who receive an A for the subject, have immense difficulties in writing with complex grammatical structures and with appropriate vocabulary.

This unpleasant experience can be explained in terms of what Krashen (2004b) calls the complexity argument, which can be applied to account for the acquisition of grammar, spelling, phonics, writing style and vocabulary.

Krashen (2004b) argues that language is too complex to learn item by item. Understanding grammatical rules to some extent may not be sufficient without understanding its properties as learning the former implies learning the latter. Similarly, learning by memorizing vocabulary lists is of little help as the lists cannot completely capture the subtlety and complexity of words. As a critique of direct instruction of vocabulary, Krashen says:

Vocabulary teaching methods typically focus on teaching simple synonyms and thus give only part of the meaning of the word and none of its social meanings or grammatical properties (p. 19).

In the Indonesian context, where English is the first foreign language to be obligatorily introduced in the school curriculum, direct instruction of grammar and vocabulary still dominates language pedagogy, reminiscent of the orthodoxy of the Grammar-Translation Method. Following the trend of shifting the pendulum in English teaching to the other extremes (see Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Sugiharto, 2005), the Indonesian government officially introduced the 1994 Curriculum, which promoted the notion of communicative competence. In this curriculum, the ability to read English books became the eventual goal.

Nevertheless, despite the introduction of the 1994 National Curriculum, which put a strong emphasis on reading skills, the rate of literacy among school students has shown no sign of improving (Sugiharto 2007b). Reading in English is still the major barriers Indonesian students are facing today. To account for this problem, I have argued that Indonesian government has taken the wrong path by conducting a in-class literacy campaign, ignoring insights from current research that literacy skills can be best facilitated from out-classes (Sugiharto, 2007b).

Without disparaging the educational benefits of in-class literacy campaign, I am particularly critical of its undesirable effects to promote autonomous language acquirers. In the first place, materials for reading given by class teacher are often not self-selected ones and are limited to topics related to academic genre, topics that not all students can benefit. In other words, in-class literacy campaign does not always provide or promote interesting reading materials. Insisting students on reading the topics not familiar to them may not result in the acquisition of grammar, vocabulary,

and spelling. Although it could be argued that they learn and even memorize these language elements while reading, the effect of their learning is only ephemeral.

In the second place, classroom reading activities do not provide an environment free of reading apprehension. Classroom only provides an artificial, not genuine, situation for a reading activity. In the classroom, students read under the instruction of their teachers, not because of their own initiatives. Thus reading is done in a high-anxiety environment, which is certainly not desirable for promoting literacy development.

Too often students are asked to read not because they are driven by their inquisitiveness but rather because they are exhorted to test what their teachers has taught them about reading strategy. Reading is thus seen as activity of proving the effectiveness of teaching strategy. What teachers often ignore in their in-class literacy campaign is the benefits the students accrue from pleasure reading, which is mostly done outside of the classroom setting. The real value of reading can be felt if students are continuously encouraged to read not just in class, but also out class. A small-scale research on reading problems in English encountered by Indonesian students has been conducted by Rosita (2006) Using both survey and interview techniques as data collection, it was found out that most students responded negatively when asked about their interests in reading in English. Various reasons were given as to why they showed no interest in reading. Among them are they do not know how to read effectively, the texts contained difficult language elements (grammar and vocabulary), and the topics given were not interesting enough.

CAN LITERACY COMPETENCE OCCUR IN THE ABSENCE OF INSTRUCTION?

If instruction often times produces deleterious effects, can literacy competence be developed without its presence? More specifically, can our ability to read and write with more mature styles, complex grammatical structures, and good dictions automatically improve without the assistance of instruction? Traditional wisdom suggests they can't. No pain, no gain has become a common credo in language learning. Direct instruction, after all, is believed to have powerful effects in one's language development.

Nonetheless, there are good reasons to suspect that literacy development can be facilitated without instruction. Language acquisition theory to date is replete with empirical evidence (well-documented in Krashen, 2004b) that reading for pleasure alone is potent enough to facilitate the growth of one's language development. Instruction, on the contrary, isn't always necessary. In other words, reading is sufficient condition for

language acquisition to take place. In the case of writing ability, I am even convinced that instruction is of little help in contributing to students' writing development, and more reading facilitates the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary (Sugiharto, 2007a; 2008).

In an extreme case, there are findings from research that reveal that people both young and adult are able to read and spell in the absence of formal instruction at home (see Krashen, 2004b). In fact, these people are already good readers and spellers before they attend schooling.

With accumulating evidence ensuring verification of competence without instruction, people don't always have to resort to learning the grammar of the language, vocabulary, and spelling in order to be able to read and write better.

FREE VOLUNTARY READING: THE PLAUSIBLE ALTERNATIVE

The popular remedies often sought to cure English fever in the country as well as elsewhere, include requiring English for young learners in the school curriculum, sending children to bilingual schools, hiring native speakers as tutors, and sending children abroad.

While there is nothing harmful with these options if one wishes to develop his/her English proficiency, there are serious impediments. First, not all learners can afford to study abroad, to attend bilingual schools and to hire English native speakers as tutors. Only the upper- middle class can enjoy such opportunities; the lower middle-class is usually left out.

Second, it takes arduous effort to design a language curriculum that matches young learners' linguistic needs and interests, not to mention providing the right teaching materials and learning facilities.

Third, learning English formally at school will put students in a high anxiety environment, which hinders the acquisition of the language. Very often, because of the demands of the curriculum and tests, teachers force their students to speak and to write without being aware of the fact they haven't had sufficient language input to do so. Fourth, the most serious problem is that early exposure to English with massive doses could threaten students' first language development.

An intriguing research done in Taiwan by Giles Witton-Davies (2006) shows that such variables as ages, extra class attendance, training under native speakers, and time spent abroad in English speaking countries are only weak predictors of success in learning English. Witton-Davis concludes that success in learning English as a foreign language doesn't depend on these factors, and that sending children to language schools may not be particularly helpful.

What then is the strongest predictor of success in a foreign language teaching? It is something that is intuitively appealing, yet something that most academics, scholars, language teaching practitioners often are unwilling to practice at best and ignore at worst - Free voluntary reading, or recreational reading (henceforth FVR).

FVR may be the most effective remedy for dealing with English fever. A missing ingredient in language education, FVR, as Krashen (2004b) argues, is the most powerful tool we have for accelerating literacy development. He, however, cautions that "it will not, by itself, produce the highest level of competence; rather, it provides a foundation so that higher level of proficiency may be reached" (p.1). Despite this caveat, Krashen still contends that FVR is still the most potent means of acquiring language effectively. It is in accord with his other important hypotheses (i.e. the Affective Filter Hypothesis and the Pleasure Hypothesis).

It is well-established that we acquire the language (i.e., English) by understanding messages we hear and read, not by producing them through speaking and writing. Thus, forcing students to write without first having enough input in the form of reading will only increase anxiety.

FVR has been proven to be an extremely powerful form of comprehensible input. FVR is radically different from other types of reading that have been used in the traditional reading approaches. It is light and easily comprehensible; it is self-selected; it is done voluntarily with no "accountability", no tests, no book reports; it is done for pleasure, for the reader's own sake, not for reward.

The obvious advantage of FVR is that it is motivating and encourages learners to be autonomous language acquirers. Research has demonstrated that FVR has tremendous effects on language development and literacy development (Witton-Davies, 2006; Krashen, 2004). FVR contributes to not only reading ability, but also writing ability. Those who report having done FVR frequently achieve superior gains in reading, writing, spelling, vocabulary, and grammar. Furthermore, FVR leads students on the path of pleasure; students are given the freedom to choose what interests them most. They are allowed to read for their own pleasure in a low anxiety environment without being haunted by the fear of being tested.

FVR is far more pleasant than the usual kind of schoolwork: students don't have to memorize vocabulary nor do they have to carefully scrutinize notoriously complex grammatical points. Rather, grammatical and vocabulary knowledge are unconsciously acquired from reading, reading done for pleasure. The conventional wisdom of "no pain, no gain" doesn't hold true for literacy development resulting from FVR. Thus, FVR is consistent with the Pleasure Hypothesis, which claims that what is good for

language and literacy development is perceived to be pleasant by the acquirer and the teacher.

A final point worth mentioning is that students are neither banned nor punished when reading books written in their first language, as published research has consistently showed that literacy skills in the first language transfer automatically across languages. It is a short-cut to faster language acquisition in the second language.

The cure for English fever then should be an activity which does no harm to students' first language development, is relatively cheap and can be accessed by everyone, and most importantly offers great pleasure. FVR meets all these conditions.

COMIC BOOKS: AN EXAMPLE OF FVR

Common wisdom tells us that examples of FVR (in the form of light reading) such as comic books, teen romances, teen novels, magazines and bestsellers – reading materials that both children and adolescents consume almost everyday – can hinder a child's literacy development, and stand in the way of understanding more “serious” and demanding academic literature. Parents especially are fearful that their children are averse to reading school textbooks, but instead getting hooked on reading popular novels and comic books. Meanwhile, teachers feel guilty unless they exhort students to finish reading books on science, history, and other demanding literature as prescribed in the school curriculum.

The role of FVR in enhancing literacy development has been overlooked. Comic books in particular have been accused as being a major hindrance in promoting heavier reading. They are often claimed to be of no academic value and are treated as “junk reading” that will not lead to “serious” literature. Inspiring students to read “serious” literature is indeed a worthy goal. Yet, there is a grave mistake with the means used to achieve the goal.

Does light reading disrupt children's passion for reading more demanding literature? No. Do parents and teachers need to worry about children who have the habit of gobbling any kind of book they find genuinely interesting and entertaining to read? They don't have to.

Overwhelming evidence exists, confirming the robustness of light reading in children's literacy development. One piece of reassuring evidence comes from South African Bishop Desmond Tutu's testimony. Also known as a distinguished writer and thinker, he says, “One of the things that my father did was to let me read comics. I devoured all kinds of comics. People used to say, “That's bad because it spoils your English,” but in fact, letting me read comics fed my love for English and my love for reading. I supposed

if he had been firm I might not have developed this deep love for reading and for English” (from Krashen, 2005).

Other case histories are equally compelling. A mother whose sons were unmotivated to read and had to be urged, coaxed, and cajoled finally felt relieved after they engaged in reading comic books.

As for her eldest son, she testifies that he “...devoured what seems to tons of the things...The motivation these comics provided was absolutely phenomenal and little bit frightening. My son would snatch up a new one and, with feverish and ravenous eyes, start gobbling it whenever he was – in the car on the way home from the market, in the middle of the yard, walking down the street, at the dinner table. All his senses seemed to shut down and he became a simple visual pipeline.” This mother also noted that comic reading led his son to other reading, saying that “he is far more interested now in reading Jules Verne and Ray Bradbury, books on electronics and science encyclopedias” (from Krashen, 2005).

It is quite plausible that light reading provides the background knowledge necessary for the understanding of heavier reading. Research also demonstrates that readers don't stay with "easy" books but go on to read more serious and demanding books, and expand the kinds of reading they do, branching out to different genres as their interests develop (Krashen, 2004b).

No less important than the above evidence, light reading promotes literacy in general. In addition to expanding vocabulary and grammatical competence, light reading is a strong predictor of success in writing.

The following is the testimony of Tasha Stoltz, a student at Sekolah Bogor Raya, who had her writing published for the first time by *The Jakarta Post* in 2006. Aspiring to become a writer and describing herself as an avid reader of fiction and as a “Potteraholic”, she wrote: “I also learned to love writing through fan-fiction; and because of fan-fiction, I look forward to writing school essays and reports, whereas previously I loathed them.”

One of my students in my writing class told me recently that she learnt much about how to write in a formal style from the comic book versions of such as *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventure of Moby Dick*, and *Travelers on Gulliver's Island*. She also reported that she developed the habit of reading through these comics. From a language acquisition point of view, large quantities of compelling, interesting and engaging "junk" reading can make a healthy “diet” for children to be consumed everyday.

IMPLICATIONS

Needless to say, if FVR has a tremendous effect on literacy development and offers great pleasure for students, so great that they acquire the language effortlessly, its inclusion in language programs at school is imperative. It is high time for the government to overhaul the policy of English language teaching in the country by taking into account insights generated from research on literacy discussed above. It follows that the design of English teaching curriculum should reflect insights of this research.

Promoting literacy skills can also be done out of schools by creating a print-rich environment like mobile libraries and community libraries. This is, in my view, the most effective remedy for those (who have no access to formal education) to help cure their English fever.

In addition, as a plausible alternative of English language pedagogy, FVR should be introduced and promoted as early as possible. A form of meaningful and comprehensible input, FVR provides the impetus for the attainment of autonomous language acquirers. The goal of our teaching then is to imbue students with free voluntary reading, rather than to require them to study grammatical rules and to memorize vocabulary lists. Encouraging them to read what they consider pleasant is tantamount not only to making them autonomous acquirers, but also to arousing their enthusiasm in reading.

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