Developing Literacy Skills through Learning Products in English for Young Learners

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Becoming literate in this era is something urgent. Literate young learners are not the exception to realize. Along with their specific characteristics, young learners also need to be facilitated to develop their literacy skills to adapt themselves as early as possible to cope with their environment.

The teaching of English to young learners can be one of the efforts to assist them to adjust their language skills to struggle in their life. Language exercises and practices in the classroom settings can help them understand, and communicate with their surroundings, in spoken and written forms of communication channels.

The teacher's design on their learning activities can prepare the young learners to be familiar with the media of communication in the society. Furthermore, the learning activities which result in tangible learning evidence are one of the ways to strengthen the sense of being able to use the language learned. In relation to reading and writing, the real learning outcome gives the young learners opportunity to remember, recycle and reuse the learning materials. Posters, reminders, cards, invitation letters, class books are some of the learning products the young learners can share to communicate with other language users. Thus, they can develop their cognitive as well as their social competence.

Through this paper, the writer discusses the importance of literacy skills in teaching English to young learners, various activities to stimulate children in developing reading and writing skills, and the advantages of having learning products in teaching English to young learners.

Keywords: *literacy skills, learning products, young learners*

Introduction

Young learners are surrounded with not only pictures, but also words, in their school, along the street, on television, on the computer, at home, in their neighbourhood, and in other places. The world can tell many stories if the young learners can decode, recognize and understand what is around them. Being literate is indispensable to survive at this era. Literacy skills, then, become one of the basic needs.

To meet the need mentioned, adults-including teachers in this case, can play their role. A teacher can design a meaningful and purposeful learning process. He or she can facilitate the young learners, and link them to the world outside their class, to develop their literacy skills. Through the learning process, the young learners can feel, see and experience how important literacy skills are. The teacher helps them get an idea that the language learned is not only to practice, but also to help them struggle in communication in the society.

The writer of this paper tries to elaborate ideas on literacy skills and the teaching of English to young learners. The points of discussion include the importance of literacy skills in teaching English to young learners, various activities to stimulate children in developing reading and writing skills, and learning products in teaching the literacy skills to young learners.

Literacy Skills and TEYL

Traditionally literacy skills are related to two language skills. They are reading and writing. Socially, literacy provides people with opportunities to share meanings across space and time. Cognitively, literacy requires that individuals use specific skills and knowledge about how the written language operates in processing text (Cameron, 2001: 123). Having literacy skills, young learners can absorb more information, share what they learn and know with their teacher, classmates, parents and other people. On the street, for example, they not only see visual images, but also get information by reading names of building and street, advertising, etc.

They can learn, give or share more if they can use technology. Since many of the young learners are digital natives, they should be more familiar with technology. They are demanded to be literate in dealing with technology when learning. Referring to the development of information and technology, nowdays technology literacy widen the coverage of literacy. Media literacy suggested by Browne (2011:39-40) is the literacy to concern in addition to visual literacy and critical literacy. Some websites, such as http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids, http://www.free.ed.gov/ and http://www.thinkquest.org/en/ help young learners develop their multi literacy skills. Technology can be a scaffolding tool for them to learn reading and writing. Playing language games often demand the young learners to read first to get ideas on what to do to play the games, and probably to continue the process by writing words, phrases or simple sentences.

It is the fact that the time to learn literacy skills at the first language and second or foreign language occurs at the same time for young learners learning English. It is a challenge for their teacher to guide them to develop literacy skills. Puckett and Black (2000) in McKay (2006: 12) state expectations of literacy development to different age classifications of young learners. Some examples of expected progress are developing a sense of writing and reading work, understanding and using writing and reading for specific purposes, reading aloud fluently and with expression, gathering information from a variety of sources, reading and writing to suit different purpose. Similarly, Lems et al. (2010:3) list some key features. They include, among others, sound-symbol matching, word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, punctuation and spelling, awareness of the diverse purposes of print and writing for different purposes.

Another challenge emerges when the orthography of the young learners' first language is different from that of English. In addition, Cameron (2001:124-125) lists some other factors affecting learning to read English as a foreign language such as the learner's previous experience in L1 literacy, the learner's knowledge of the foreign language and the learner's age. Indonesian young learners learning English will not have a serious problem with English when they find that both English and Indonesian use roman alphabets.

However, they need more time when learning that their phonemic systems are quite different. English which is included in opaque or deep orthographies is different from Indonesian. The symbols in English do not match closely with their phonemes. In this case, the sequencial learning process of listening-speaking-reading-writing will be supporting. After getting the language through auditory stimuli, the young learners pronounce the language and then see the words before learning to make the writing symbols. To construct meaning, they need rely on phonological, visual, and semantic information.

Although it is complicated, the process to develop young learners' literacy skills needs to be supported. The teacher, through his or her design of teaching and learning activities should provide a literate environment and models of literacy skill learning in the classroom.

Activities to Develop Literacy Skills

Various activities can be designed for classroom settings to help young learners develop their language skills. Murray and Christison (2011: 79-80) state that the activities should be simple, easy, orally based, desirable, varied and they should promote a positive affective climate in the classroom. Through the activities the young learners can learn and develop their skills in the class which is enjoyable and educationale, the activities that also facilitate the young learners to develop their multiple intelligences.

To develop literacy skills, Joyce et al. (2009:59) suggest picture-word inductive model. The teacher represents pictures, then students 'shake out' the words. They identify, draw line to the pictures and produce words and then after seeing the words, they can say, hear, spell. To follow up these activities, the students can write above word level, further, to express their ideas, feelings and experiences. Referring to literacy skill development, Murray and Christison (2011: 83) emphasize the importance of the foundational skills of reading consisting of print concepts, alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness.

The activities to develop literacy skills can be parts of skill getting and or/ skill using (Nunan, 1989:60-63). Young learners can manipulate phonological and grammatical forms to be practiced and then they apply what they learned to communicate their message. From a controlled class survey asking them to interview their classmates' hobbies using the student worksheet, young learners extend their opportunity to obtain such data outside the classroom, for example, by asking their family members or friends in their neighbourhood, and make a simple written report to convey more personal meanings. Thus, from a controlled learning activity in the classroom, the young learners use English as a means of communication with people around them in the wider world.

Considering the characteristics of young learners, their learning styles and strategies, the learning activities can involve different sensories. A tracing of letters or words, colouring, seing and finding correct written texts and listening and finding information are some examples to activate their visual and auditory abilities. Through technology, a school with its twin school abroad can function the Internet to link two groups of young learners in learning literacy skills. Emailing will be one of the alternatives to apply. A variety of learning stimuli enables them to learn more enthusiastically and to have fun in their class.

A stimulus for reading can be obtained from an activity of class performance, as experienced by the writer. Beforehand, the learners practice and do the rehearsal guided by a

written scenario. The script prepared by the teacher introduces a certain form of written text. Then, the learners' activities of reading and memorizing help them recognize, decode, get sight words and recode words, if necessary. Learning activities such as book reading and word choosing and matching can also be helpful and useful.

Much exposure on reading and writing will be of help in developing young learners' literacy skills. Lems et al (2010:88) recommend reading everyday in the classroom, while Hall (1987) in Cameron (2001: 145) suggests emergent literacy. Emergent literacy is the phenomenon in which young learners seem to learn to read without any teaching, gradually, and through exposer to text and reading. Repeated words, formats and language forms can help young learners learn the language and how it is used for different purposes.

Learning Products in TEYL

Learning activities are not just for fun, they have to be educational as well. The activities must have learning objectives and involve the learners actively in the process. Willis states that tasks should have an outcome. They are not only the practice of language form. (Willis, 1996: 24). The outcome can be tangible learning evidence.

Learning products play significant roles. The products can be compiled in the learners' portfolios. They not only show the outcome of the learners' learning achievement but also inform to the parents and society what happened or what is going on in the learning process. This can meet the demand for public accountability in teaching and learning process. The public can give feedback to support and enhance learning. Moreover, learning products enable the learners to have a sense of being success and feel able to use the language learned and to experience that language learning with its products is valued. Further, Murphy and Smith (1992: 81) emphasize that the portfolios can be used to enlist support from the environment, parents, administrators, and school board members.

Through the learning products it is expected that young learners can read and write different texts for different purposes. The learning products give the young learners opportunity to remember, recycle and reuse the learning materials. Cut out figures and pictures with information sticked on the class board or wall can be the media. Seeing them almost everyday, the young learners will be familiar with the writing system. Listening to their teacher, they can decode and in turn, recode the words. In teaching English to young learners, the texts to introduce can be messages, schedules, posters, reminders, cards, class picture dictionary, invitation letters, story book, class book, etc. In relation to technology, the learning products can be the archived emails written to the teacher and or/other students. Thus, they can develop their cognitive as well as their social competence in making the learning products which can be for personal or public access, printed or non-printed media, individual or group working.

To make the learning products, young learners can be involved in class projects, in particular production projects (Stoller, 2002). For example, each of the young learners is asked to write a personal profile. Finishing writing, the work is compiled into one class book which can be the class learning product for the each of the learners, classmates, teacher, school, parents or for the public. Another kind of production projects may accomodate various learners interests, talent and abilities. *This is my monster* project requiring the learners to imagine, visualize and colour a picture of a monster, and describe it by using their words

related to parts of the body and a simple language form. Using the products they made, the class members can help one another develop not only writing and reading, but listening and speaking as well if learning activities to develop language skills have been well designed by the teacher.

Conclusion

Developing young learners' literacy skills is important to do. It is to assist the young learners not only to learn and practice the language but also to use the language learned to communicate and share what they know with other language interlocutor and readers in the classroom, at school or wider communication world. By learning and developing literacy skills, they have been introduced to the value of being literate among the community members. Teachers, through their teaching and learning activities, enable this happen. They contribute significantly on the process leading young learners to be skillfully literate. The learners' learning products can deliver meaningful messages on what happened in the language class and bridge a communication gap between the classroom and the world outside.

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