

“Where would *child lit* fits”: Encapsulating Topics in Early Literacy

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ABSTRACT

The following paper is a synthesized paper on the topics of Early (emergent bilinguals) literacy, with an overview of how early literacy is applied in the North American countries. Having to study the body of knowledge in early literacy topics, this paper also attempts to explore some possible practices in the EFL context of Asia, particularly the Indonesian setting. The authors of the study also shared concerns regarding the practices of Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) in Indonesia that seem to exclude the notion of *early (emergent bilinguals) literacy*. Additionally, thinking about TEYL in Indonesia should also repute the study of children’s literature as it presents potentials for cognitive and affective developments. Packed with sociocultural perspectives in early literacy, this paper later argues that foregrounding the beliefs of TEYL into early literacy for kids would bring about significant changes in the students’ output. It is highly recommended that the study of children’s literature be included in the curriculum and literacy instructions for primary and secondary schools as it offers abundant opportunities for early literacy in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Early literacy, emergent bilinguals, EFL/ESL context, children’s literature potentials*

1. INTRODUCTION

Acknowledged as the ‘first foreign language’ in Indonesia soon after the country’s independence declaration in 1945 (Lamb & Coleman, 2008), English literacy is taught as a compulsory subject in middle schools and colleges. As for elementary and kindergarten students, English literacy is only taught if their schools could afford English teachers. Despite the growing interest in learning English among younger students and their parents, it is only accessible to schools with adequate infrastructures, one of which is qualified English teachers. These English teachers are required to not only be familiar with children’s cognitive and psychological development but also can render the theoretical framework of TEYL into clear instructions to support students’ bilingual emergent literacy. Responding to the demand for qualified TEYL teachers, some reputable universities in Indonesia offer TEYL as a core subject in their curriculum.

Every year undergraduate students enrol in TEYL subject in hope that the training and course work that they receive will equip them with the knowledge and skills to teach English in elementary grades. Consequently, to bridge the undergrads’ expectations in taking TEYL

courses, a comprehensive framework is needed. In this case, Musthafa (2010) elaborates on the requirements, which he addressed as the “pillars”, that teachers of English for Young Learners need to be aware of, to then develop in their classroom instruction. Unfortunately, not many university TEYL programs adopt the “pillars”, resulting in a relatively unsuccessful learning instruction that impacts the teaching of English literacy to younger students. Thus, it is noteworthy to call on the “pillars” to explain how TEYL course programs should be substantiated in literacy education for children.

This synthesized paper employs a socio-cultural perspective to explore the framework of early literacy and learning theories, borrowing the body of knowledge of childhood development, proposed by renowned psychologists such as Vygotsky and Piaget. It is aimed at capturing the scope of early literacy, by first tracking down how children are exposed to language and literacy, then describing how they learn, to elaborating on how teachers/parents can support the development of children’s literacy. An insight into how early literacy navigates in the emerging multiliteracies of the 2nd decade of the 21st century will also be included. To close the discussion, this paper will propose the use of

children's literature to accommodate children's English literacy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Early Literacy and Children as Emergent Bilinguals*

A child's language development has an early start, as early as being a fetus in a mother's womb. Medical reports mentioned that prenatal physical activities and other stimuli, such as talking to babies, brisk walking, gardening, doing housework, jogging, cycling contributed a significant influence to human fetus and neonates in terms of their crying melody and cooing (Mampe et al., 2009; Jukic et al., 2013). This indicates that with continuous and proper stimulation, a child would likely develop language and literacy simultaneously. Rosenquest (2002) elucidate the literacy journey from infants to toddlerhood, which will later mark children's literacy and language development in the school environment. As young as nine-month-old, an infant may be able to recognize alphabet shapes and the sounds they make. A two-year-old can start to name animals and simple objects around them, some others play pretend to hold a book and read.

Recently, the scope of emerging literacy undergoes a shift, responding to the fact how children gain and develop knowledge and skills prior to formally learning to read and write at schools (Helman, 2016; Rhyner, Haebig, & West, 2009). Thus, it is apparent to explain the relationship between early language acquisition and emergent literacy, since reading is considered as "linguistic activity". In addition, Teale and Sulzby (1986, cited in Rhyner et al., 2009) believed that children's cognitive development plays a significant role in their future literacy development. Prior to learning about printed words, children first acquire knowledge about their native language through oral language skills, which means as the term "emergent" indicates, children are "becoming" literate when they learn oral and written language concurrently. This suggests that children's literacy skills may blossom in an environment that supports both the oral and written cycle.

2.2. *Child Learn, Child Play and Children's Literature*

As mentioned earlier, this paper takes on a sociocultural perspective of child development, which highlights that infants, toddlers, and young children absorb and train various skills through adult-child interactions. Vygotsky (1986 cited Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003) hypothesized that social interactions with adults in the same cultural contexts of society are essential to children's cognitive development. Expanding

on Vygotsky's theories, Rogoff (1990 in Dodici et al., 2003) put forward the idea that skill development necessitates the interaction of two parties, a teacher (usually, an adult) and a learner (usually, a child). She called this an "apprenticeship-type relationship" that concerned "guided participation" which happens particularly in daily activities. To some extent, the apprenticeship style does not give enough space for the learner to develop their style of learning, a sense of decision making to what he/she finds suitable.

While the seeming hierarchy in "the apprenticeship" may not explain children's learning style at best, literacy developed through child play might offer a better view. Musthafa (1995) compiled some research that clarifies the connection between literacy and child play within a socio-cultural perspective which benefited from the works of Vygotsky, Brunner, Dyson. Through the socio-cultural lens, he reveals that in an attempt to make sense of the world, a child uses the knowledge to be represented in a play, as much as in literacy. This is very plausible since children enact their experiences to be valued as members of a particular society and its cultural heritage. In that sense, children's play and their literacy development correlate in the sense that both in play and literacy development, a child employs the existing knowledge to make meaning of the world, which is always the focus of literacy skills.

Another research that supports the connection of child play and their literacy development, was an ethnographic study of a bilingual child in Canada. Kendrik (2005) collected the narrative incidents of a young girl coming from a Chinese – Vietnamese – English family background. Her research method was rather unique, where she played the dual role of a playmate and a researcher. The duality allowed Kendrik to access the play world of the little girl, while at the same time keeping her at bay to observe the girl's activities. With this approach, Kendrik had a better comprehension of how the girl made meaning through her play stories. She found major themes from the narrative chapters of play stories, which are maintaining family relationships, celebrating family events, and caring for offspring. These themes emerged from how the little girl played two of women's roles, as a mother and a working woman. It is interesting to see how this young girl in her socio-cultural environment, interacting with her family, established her understanding of various women's roles in society. What can be accomplished from Kendrik's research is that play assists the mode of inquiry and autobiographical expression for the little girl to bring her imagined future life into sight.

Often TEYL courses advocate storytelling as a means of getting children engaged with the language. Texts chosen and read to by adults seem a reasonable

activity for developing the children’s English literacy. Follow-up activities typically involve students in question-and-answer sessions, and role-playing based on the story. All of these are acceptable, except usually, teachers do not completely follow whether students are given the right to choose what they like. So, a rather engaging follow-up of a storytelling session should consider allowing young students to remake their play stories to make their own decision. Moreover, when children’s play narratives are viewed as literary texts and social texts, it will bring forth the potential to promote current literacy learning that involves “self-construction” in early childhood.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This paper is based on Qualitative Research Synthesis (QRS) study, with an interpretive method (Drisko, 2019; Harris, 1998). In this case, the interpretive method is done commonly to augment prior construct and theory. Further, Drisko addressed that unlike the aggregative method of research synthesis which focuses on a body of quantitative results, an interpretive method emphasises the “result” of previous qualitative results instead of scrutinizing the original data. A simple definition provided by Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) suggested that research synthesis “aggregates, integrates, and/or interprets the findings from (usually) qualitative studies.

Cooper (1998) noted that there are many references as to the kind of activities a research synthesis usually called. Terms such as literature review, research review, integrative research review, research synthesis, and meta-analysis typically are included in QRS endeavours.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The process of Qualitative Research Synthesis follows several stages: *Protocols (Research Question(s), Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria, Search Strategy, Extraction and Appraisal Tools), Search and Screen (Run Search, Screen Abstract, Screen Full Text), Analyse (Synthesize & Interpret Findings).*

The research problem that geared this study is how has research topics in early literacy been accounted for, concerning the practices of EFL/ESL in Indonesia, also exploring how the kinds of literature for children might be beneficial to be used as primary resources in TEYL classes. To support these, a body of knowledge was collected through google scholar under the keywords of *early literacy, emergent bilingual literacy, children’s literature and literacy instruction.*

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Rethinking “EFL/ELS” in Indonesia

In the context where English is positioned as a second or foreign language, the term “emergent bilinguals” becomes the key point in the discussion of English literacy. Historically, the term is used in the context of education for equity in the United States, as a part of the, *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* that wished to accommodate immigrant children whose native language is not English yet must cope with English as a medium instruction at schools (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008). This condition brought about challenges to the teachers in the U.S., particularly in elementary classrooms, where students need to have their native culture and linguistic profile acknowledged by the curriculum and instruction. Consequently, reading and writing instruction for emergent bilinguals, or as Helman (2016) kindly notes as equal “English Learners” (EL), requires different teaching methods and approaches. To develop alternative methods in the teaching of EL, she delivered a roadmap explaining several aspects that affect the emergent bilinguals' Second-Language Literacy Development.

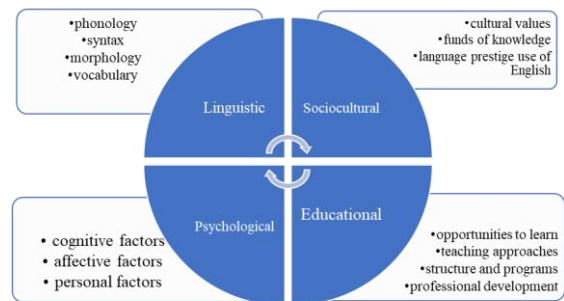


Figure 1 Factors influencing second-language literacy learning (taken from Helman, 2016)

The roadmap implies that teachers should consider at least one of the factors developing English literacy instruction. Recognizing emergent bilinguals as diverse through classroom instruction will certainly empower these students' literacy skill and their future roles in society.

Interestingly, to put in Indonesian context where English is the main foreign language, local students are positioned as the emergent bilinguals, having first to master Bahasa Indonesia before English. This conception is different from how emergent bilinguals are introduced in the U.S. context. Turnbull (2016) recommends a revision to the term “emergent bilinguals” since it only serves the context of non-native speakers in the USA, while it should also cover all foreign language learners in varying conditions. He offers his definition of emergent bilinguals as:

... any person who is actively in the process of acquiring knowledge of a second language and developing bilingual languaging skills for use in a given situation relevant to their individual needs to learn the TL.

The refined definition does not emphasize a particular proficiency or regular use of both languages, nor does it involve a comparison with monolingual native speakers. Instead, it focuses on the ongoing process of gaining language knowledge and developing L2 skills as a potential recourse for making and conveying meaning in situations relevant to the individual speaker's situation (3).

If, as suggested by Turnbull, FL education is merged as bilingual education, then emergent bilinguals in FL classrooms will be given a vast opportunity to use L1 and L2 as “emergent” as they are. This may mean that FL learners will be encouraged to naturally use the “occurring bilingual language” as they need. So, they will be able to develop their cognitive skills and contribute to the real world as “emergent bilingual they are”. However, for the Indonesia FL context, Turnbull’s insight still requires further empirical exploration.

4.2. A Place for Children’s Literature in Early Literacy Learning

Given the understanding of who children are and how they are likely to learn a language, this part of the paper offers some views regarding supporting literacy learning with children’s literature. The play environment from which children find comfort in making meaning of the world is a text which offers various stimuli for literacy development. From Kendrik’s work, the play texts are a kind of Bildungsroman (Bakhtin, 1934–5/1981 cited in Kendrik) – they are a story of children’s ‘becoming’, and through language and genre, children construct their identity. This part of the paper wishes to deliberate how children’s literature can be used to bridge early literacy for emergent bilinguals.

Children’s literature holds potential as texts used in English literacy classrooms. It provides a convenient set of texts which illustrate socio-cultural issues as the characters in a story grow, learn, and interact. Parents and teachers can examine their assumptions about culture and diversity, the many issues that children’s literature addresses and explores as the main characters interact with their families and communities. Professors in the fields of children’s literature and education, such as Nodelman (1998) and Sipe (1999) explore the role of children’s literature by appraising how childhood is constructed through developmental theory and other scientific evidence.

In his approach, Nodelman considered that as children develop, they might pass through the stages as described by Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, and other experts. Yet he offered valuable insights in terms of how these theories of children’s development misread childhood and children, which obscured children’s cognitive and affective from reaching its potentials developed from exposures to children’s books. Nodelman takes a closer investigation into what Piaget theorized that children are egocentric. He disputes that such examination must be viewed from another perspective since it somehow assumes that children are incapable of processing emotions, such as empathy towards others. In other words, Piaget somehow made an illogical connection between the physical and the emotional in describing children’s development stage. Nodelman believes that such a view suggests that adult underestimates children’s capability in enjoying books or stories about people different from themselves if they are egocentric. Piaget’s and Kohlberg’s evaluation of children’s stages of development also bear the assumption that “childhood thinking does not pass perfect approximations of an ideal adult standard of mental functioning” (79). It seems that adults’ ideological assumptions toward childhood and children underestimate children’s cognitive reasoning, affective measuring, and linguistic ability. In other words, adults control how children should be defined according to the adult’s socio-cultural setting.

The immediate implication of such generic assumptions about childhood and children is that children’s sense of readership must be verified by adults. This means that what passes as “good books” for children should not contain bad messages, undesirable social behaviour, or grotesque images that might give kids a nightmare. Hence, Hollindale (1988) asserted that ideology operates in three levels: implicit ideology, explicit ideology, and the dominant culture. To clarify how children response to ideologies offered in books, Sipe (1999) offers adult with stances of how adult utilizes texts for children, by positioning children as active readers. The dialectic relationship of author, text, and children brings about a disposition of how an author embeds ideology in literature. In more focus, Sipe noted down how children respond to literature in the classroom which is mostly based on how children explore intertextual affiliation from the text to their cultural schemata. Children’s intertextual responses are invaluable, as Sipe concludes that such attempts of continuous linking information are significant since children will “develop a sense of themselves as individuals and members of society” (127).

Choosing the appropriate books for the right readers requires a set of criteria. Trim (2004) suggested that selecting children’s books for kids should consider

several aspects, which are physical development, language development, cognition, personality, social development, and moral development. In developing the criteria, Trim excogitated on theories such as Vygotsky, Piaget, and Kohlberg, those whose theories on children's development were somewhat viewed differently from the perspective of children's literature scholars. Despite the subtle dispute, utilizing children's literature as a part of the reading program to promote early literacy is worth valuing.

When children's literature is settled in children's classroom curriculum, Rosenquest (2002) extends a plan to connect language, literacy, and literature, in this case, picture books. In reading aloud sessions, teachers can draw upon the language and the images from the book to plan activities for the students. When children are familiar with a favourite book, they will often bring to mind the text and reconstruct the scenes from their favourite stories. The process of re-enacting stories will likely share the same positive result as what Kendrik had investigated on children's play stories.

4.3. Navigating Early Literacy in the 21st century

Current practices of literacy for young children and their families are exemplified by the use of digital technologies, which have become more and more compact, reasonably inexpensive, and competent. With the shift in the tools of communication, human civilization is constructing new learning environments in which the children grow up. As indicated by Vygotsky's sociocultural conceptualizations of learning where, "mental processes are viewed as social in origin and mediated through interaction using symbolic representations such as language and cultural artifacts" (Wertsch, 2007 in Flewitt, Messer, & Kucirkova, 2014). In the communication practices of the 21st-century culture, the artifacts comprise a collection of digital devices such as iPads, computer tablets, smartphones, and new terms such as 'Digital Natives' were coined (Prensky, 2001).

When children are familiar with operating their iPads, tablets, or smartphones at home with parents, then teachers at school need to accommodate the "digital play and learning" in classroom contexts. Kontavourki and Tafa (2019) delve into the issue of the "appropriateness" of using digital devices in aiding early literacy. Taking into account factors such as whether employing a particular digital aid is age-appropriate for young children should become the main concern in "digital play-pedagogy". Based on Vygotsky's idea of "tool mediation", children will attempt to master any tools/devices, to understand the function, including with digital devices. Thus, teachers also need to plan digital

pedagogy by observing, planning, implementing instruction, concerning what devices that children use in and out of school, and how they play with them. A part of this kind of pedagogy also is employing a multimodal approach, using a mixture of digital media and printed texts, such as children's literature and pop culture texts, to mediate the children's activity.

Subsequently, children's activity of reading from digital books also one of the foci in digital pedagogy. Screen reading becomes more prevalent among children in the past decade, as more gadgets are more affordable recently. Kucirkova (2009) notes that e-books for kids present in the form of picture books, digital books, presented in devices such as Kindle, or apps available in smartphones. These books engage young readers with haptic interaction through the features on the touchscreens, offer them the opportunity to customize the experience of digital reading and listening. With the ability to navigate information presented in the e-book, children are given the autonomy to make meaning and re-create stories as to how it would be acceptable in their world.

This also brings forth the topic of how children develop as authors of digital books. In her book chapter, Kucirkova (2018) dig deeper to explore how children make their digital books with story-making and story-sharing apps that allow them to revise and re-create the content of a story. She highlights children as story makers, where it correlates to "maker-centred learning" which is considered as "a new kind of hands-on pedagogy—a responsive and flexible pedagogy that encourages community and collaboration." Kucirkova's work on children as authors of children's stories corresponds to Bruner's notion that "narrative is fundamental to constructing reality and making sense of life".

5. CONCLUSION

Through synthesizing previous literature on early literacy this paper has explicated points on how early literacy begins and how children play and learn comfortably, considering emergent bilingual in foreign language education, and bridging early literacy with children's literature. This paper recommends primary teachers develop an interconnected curriculum through a focus on children's literature since it allows teachers to carefully raise nurture language and literacy together with developing children's flexible response towards it. This activity might contribute to the children's love toward reading and books while appreciating the values offered in the stories, gaining them the right to be "the literate children". More importantly, bridging literature

and literacy requires ample scaffolding by adults (particularly teachers), which is noteworthy in the context of TEYL in Indonesia.

In the past two decades of the 21st century, early literacy has become more noticeable through digital media, with children's books transformed into e-books. Despite the technology gap between what was theorized about children's cognitive and affective development, the practices of digital play literacy do not stem far from socio-cultural perspectives proposed by Vygotsky and Bruner. The fact that children can construct their own stories with current technologies empowered children to participate in developing their literacy and make meaning of their interconnected world.

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