

Investigating Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-based Literacy Assessment Implemented by An EFL Teacher at A Junior High School in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The program of freedom to learn (*Merdeka Belajar*) attempts to shape students to think critically and be aware of the contexts of the materials they are learning. It will be later assessed through the Minimum Competency Assessment (*Asesmen Kompetensi Minimum*) by focusing on their literacy and numeracy skills. However, the majority of Indonesian EFL teachers seemed not to have a comprehensive understanding yet of the primary concepts involved in implementing this program. Therefore, this study investigated the higher-order thinking skills (HOTS)-literacy assessment implemented by an EFL teacher at a junior high school in Indonesia. A case study was employed involving one English teacher from a school in West Java province, Indonesia. To collect data, three instruments were used, namely classroom observation, interview with the teacher, and document analysis. The findings of this study revealed that the teacher applied two types of assessments, namely formative and summative assessments. Formative assessment was done through vocabulary building, pronouncing words, and meaning-making, while the summative assessment was administered by contextualizing the materials and test items, giving open-ended questions, and using picture series to make a storyline. In addition, literacy skill was promoted in the levels of performative and functional. Performative was constructed to allow the students to read the written text as it is, while functional levels could give the students the opportunity to get the message behind the text. As a recommendation, these types of assessment could train the teacher to be ready in facing the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM).

Keywords: EFL teacher, higher order thinking skills, literacy assessment, the minimum competency assessment

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The replacement of Indonesia's Minister of Education and Culture in 2019 led to a number of changes, both systemically and partially. One of the systemic impacts of this replacement was the initial program of the Freedom of Learning (*Merdeka Belajar*) which raised numerous questions and concerns among teachers and educational policymakers. As stated by Yamin and Syahrir (2020), this program was designed to envision a promising future for education, with a focus on assisting teachers in actively participating in class without having to worry about difficult administrative and appraisal responsibilities. In detail, this program outlines four policies including the transformation of the National Standard Test (USBN) into a school-based assessment, the replacement of the National Examination (UN) to a

minimum competency assessment and character survey, teacher autonomy in lesson planning, and flexible zoning system for students' admissions. These policies emphasize the need of focusing students' learning and assessment on literacy, numeracy, reasoning, and character education. Students should be able to think and reason freely when solving challenges (Yamin & Syahrir, 2020).

However, most teachers, particularly Indonesian EFL teachers at the junior high school level, are still unaware of the program in practice since they are having problems in designing assessment instruments that focus on students' literacy skills (Yamin & Syahrir, 2020). Some of the teachers believed that the literacy assessment will only look at explicit facts and students' basic reading skills. Literacy assessment, in fact, necessitates students'

ability to read texts from a variety of perspectives in specific circumstances (Antonnaci & O'Callaghan, 2012). Students need to be immersed in the context in which they comprehend, not just what they grasp from a text.

To address this issue, the EFL teachers are suggested to develop literacy assessments by integrating them into higher order thinking skills (HOTS). These thinking skills enable students to relate, analyze, compare, contrast, and apply the context of a text (Yen & Halili, 2015). This is also supported by Setyarini, Muslim, Rukmini, Yuliasri, and Mujiyanto (2018) who claimed that HOTS might develop some of the students' knowledge such as factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive knowledge that allows them to further explore the content of the text delivered. Although some studies on critical literacy had been conducted previously, the results still found that the teacher-participants were still dependent on the materials provided in the textbook without involving students' higher order thinking skills (Hidayat, Gustine, and Setyarini, 2020). Another research conducted by Firooz, Razavipour, and Ahmadi (2019) also supported that the EFL teachers' assessment literacy still constructed the literacy rubrics concerning language skills without focusing on the higher order thinking skills.

Therefore, this paper reports the investigation reports of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) based literacy assessment implemented by an EFL junior secondary teacher. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of literacy assessment particularly in familiarizing students with perceiving texts from a diverse perspective and interpreting them according to the context and experience by employing their higher order thinking skills (HOTS).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The commemoration of National Teachers Day served as a springboard for educational reform in Indonesia. It is due to the fact that the new Minister of Education and Culture, Nadiem Makarim, initiated the program of freedom to learn (*Merdeka Belajar*) in his speech on that day. This program is a response to the significance of a globally competitive education system in Indonesia, which emphasizes freedom of thinking. This concept is considered to have been developed as a way to help Indonesian students improve their literacy and numeracy skills. As explained by Yamin and Syahrir (2020), the PISA test results revealed that no Indonesian students could reach the sixth level of the three areas tested, including mathematics, science, and reading.

In term of the students' ability to read texts, the results of the test revealed that 50% of Indonesian students were unable to articulate the primary idea in a text, comprehend the relationship between sentences in a

paragraph, or explain the meaning of a reading text (Yamin & Syahrir, 2020). The low literacy skills of Indonesian students were thought to be one of the causes of their incapacity to absorb information from the text (Gustine, 2018; Kurniawati, Suryadarma, Bima, & Yusrina, 2018). Due to their limited reading skills, students were only able to grasp the clear meaning of information from a text without being able to reason adequately. Literacy skills enable students to think in a more comprehensive and critical approach, especially while reading a book. Students need to consider who should be heard in the text and who should not, as well as why the text is written in a certain way to achieve specific aims (Janks, 2009; Gustine, 2018). Despite the fact that literacy skills are deemed very important to teach in the classroom, most junior high school English teachers in Indonesia have not done a good job of promoting them. A study conducted by Gustine (2018) found that English teachers did not know how to connect the concept of critical literacy to reading techniques in their classroom practices.

The results of this study were also supported by Setyarini, Muslim, Rukmini, Yuliasri, and Mujiyanto (2018) claiming that so far EFL teachers had not implemented thinking skills in teaching a text to the students. As demonstrated by the teachers through their teaching methodology, they only concentrated on remembering and understanding skills as the target levels of thinking (Setyarini, Muslim, Rukmini, Yuliasri, & Mujiyanto, 2018). Consequently, the teachers inclined to ask lower level questions where the answers could be found explicitly in the text (Setyarini, Muslim, Rukmini, Yuliasri, & Mujiyanto, 2018; Huh, 2016). Given the aforementioned issues, Indonesia EFL teachers should integrate higher order thinking skills (HOTS) based literacy assessment to implement the freedom to learn program (*Merdeka Belajar*). This assessment was designed to assist teachers in developing examination questions and preparing students to solve complicated problems in their daily lives. Through higher order thinking skills, students are expected to be able to analyze, reflect, evaluate, and justify the texts they read based on the context they are facing (Cottrell, 2017). It indicates that higher order thinking skills (HOTS) based assessment supports students to analyze a text, reflect on it in real life contexts, evaluate and make judgments based on their opinions and life experiences that are relevant to the content of the text.

Furthermore, EFL teachers are supposed to support the main purpose of the freedom to learn program, which is to monitor the quality of education and equip students with lifelong skills by developing a HOTS-based literacy assessment model. This assessment model might potentially be a reimaging of the national standard test, which has been used to assess academic learning accomplishment by assessing basic reading, computer literacy, and higher order thinking skills.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study is a qualitative study with a case study as a research design due to several reasons. It analyses, characterizes, and interprets data in the form of EFL teachers' HOTS-based literacy assessment to provide a holistic explanation of complex phenomena (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). The main objective of this inquiry study is also capturing the HOTS-based literacy assessment that cannot be quantified since it requires a direct description from the experience respondent of this phenomenon.

3.2. Participants of the Study

As research participants, one class of eighth grade students and one English teacher were involved due to several reasons. Firstly, Mrs. Anne (pseudonym) has more than 20 years of English teaching experience at the junior secondary level. Her experience implied that Mrs. Anne had used a variety of learning methods and assessments, including integrating higher order thinking and literacy skills. Besides, Mrs. Anne was also involved in teacher development programs discussing the urgency of literacy and higher order thinking skills as the main skills in the 21st century education. Secondly, the students were selected because the Minimum Competency Assessment program targeted the eighth graders as the participants in implementing the assessment. Hence, the results of this study would portray the students' readiness to participate in the program and they would be some inputs for the teacher in improving the quality of learning and assessment.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Regarding data collection procedure, three instruments were used to collect data, namely classroom observation, interview with the teacher and students, and document analysis. Data from the classroom observation provided an overview of assessment types and materials used by the teachers, particularly related to HOTS and literacy skills. Interviews with the teacher were intended to gain information on how they developed the types and materials of assessment related to Higher Order Thinking Skills as well as their perceptions of the assessments used. On the other hand, interviews with the students were aimed at collecting information on how they perceived the assessments implemented by the teachers. Lastly, document analysis was focused on the lesson plans made by the teachers, learning materials, and scoring rubric made by the teacher to assess the students' literacy and higher order thinking skills.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data obtained from the classroom observations and interviews in the form of audio-video recordings

Table 1. Data analysis framework of higher order thinking skills-based literacy assessment (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, 1987).

| Levels of Literacy Skills | Higher Order Thinking Skills |
|--|------------------------------|
| Performative <i>(Allow a written message to be decoded into speech in order to ascertain its meaning and vice versa)</i> | Remembering, Understanding |
| Functional <i>(Made of literacy in interpersonal communication)</i> | Applying |
| Informational <i>(Literacy plays in the communication of knowledge)</i> | Analyzing Evaluating |
| Epistemic <i>(Literacy is a mode of communication)</i> | Creating |

were transcribed. In addition, the data from document analysis were codified based on the principles of promoting Higher Order Thinking Skills and designing critical pedagogy classroom. The interpretation of the data referred to the theory of literacy assessment in HOTS-based English learning to answer research questions as proposed by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) and Wells (1987) as presented in Table 1.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of data analysis revealed that Mrs. Anne implemented two types of assessment to assess students' literacy and higher order thinking skills (HOTS), namely formative and summative assessments. Each of these assessments was applied at different timescales according to the purpose of the assessment. The results of classroom observation indicated that the teacher used formative assessment during the instructional process aiming at monitoring students' learning, particularly related to acquiring literacy and higher order thinking skills from the material presented. Meanwhile, the summative assessment was completed at the end of the learning topic with the goal of evaluating students' learning at the final instructional unit by comparing it to a set of standards or benchmarks.

4.1. Teacher-made HOTS-based Formative Assessments in Teaching Literacy

The findings of the document analysis on the text designed by the teacher in the formative tests contained assessment construct focusing on grammar and vocabulary mastery. The teacher emphasized the core model that underpinned the relationship between form and meaning, a collection of information structure gleaned from inside the text while looking for synonyms for certain words.

Table 2. Analysis of construct assessment from the teacher-made formative assessment in the second meeting

| Test items | Assessment Construct | Students' Thinking Skills |
|--|---|---|
| What do you think of the story? | Context related story | Evaluating information |
| What about the story of <i>Dayang Sumbi</i> ? Do you impress it? | Perceptional thinking | Analyzing the information from the text |
| What if <i>Tumang</i> was not back? | Imaginative thinking | Analyzing and evaluating the story. |
| How can <i>Dayang Sumbi</i> love <i>Sangkurang</i> ? | Context related text and opined statements. | Predicting the storyline. |
| Why do you think <i>Sangkuriang</i> killed <i>Tumang</i> ? | Reasonable arguments | Analyzing and evaluating the story. |

The students were also required to comprehend the linguistic aspects of genre from the text being taught so that they could only find information based on the text and recall the explanation from the teacher presented previously.

As shown in Table 2, the test items implied that the teacher focused on students' lower order thinking skills such as memorizing, interpreting a text, and finding explicit information from the text in Table 2.

The results of document analysis were also strengthened by the data gained from the interview with Mrs. Anne who revealed her reasons for designing such test items. She admitted that these items placed a greater emphasis on the language features of narrative text. According to her, literacy skills and higher order thinking were closely related to students' ability to grasp information from written texts delivered. She assumed that the students would have good literacy skills once they were able to recall information from a text.

The findings from the document analysis and interview with the teacher were inversely proportional to the results of the classroom observation underlining that the students were incapable to demonstrate the skills intended by the teacher through the designated assessment. They were confused by the questions given and admitted that these questions were very difficult for them. Some of them in the interview also claimed that they had limited vocabulary, while the teacher kept using unfamiliar words in telling the story. As a result, the assessment did not measure the desired target, particularly in assessing students' literacy and higher order thinking skills.

Such teacher-made test items explained above showed that the teacher followed the idea of Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis (2004) in developing assessment items that is started from determining the intended uses of an assessment and identifying learning outcomes that would be assessed. At this point, the teacher mentioned that she wanted to evaluate the

students' understanding toward the linguistic features of narrative text that she claimed as a part of literacy learning. Even so, according to Kucirkova, Rowe, Oliver, and Piestrzynski (2019) and Setyarini, Muslim, Rukmini, Yuliasri, and Mujiyanto (2018), such a type of assessment only reached the performative level as seen by the students' thinking skills required in each item. It is also due to the teacher's assumption underlining that literacy skills dealt with the students' ability to read the written text and get the explicit meaning from it, so she only designed several items focusing on grammar, vocabulary building, and meaning making.

Another formative assessment was identified in the second classroom observation through giving open-ended questions orally. The types of questions consisted of context-related story, perceptional thinking, imaginative thinking, opinionated statements, reasonable arguments as assessment constructs. Each of those types was conveyed to the students aiming at trying to establish students' engagement related to the previous discussed story. In detail, the teacher purposed to explore the students understanding and engagement to the story and checked whether they associated the story with their prior knowledge and experiences. These items are shown in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the teacher clearly modified her strategy in designing test items that promote students' higher order thinking and literacy skills. During the interview, the teacher claimed that she noticed the prior test items had not optimized the students' cognitive thinking because they only focused on predetermined answers, which tended to be more grammatical practices. As a result, such questions did not allow the students to engage in learning, and the class appeared to be passive with no remarks or reactions. In addition, the teacher also affirmed that she applied contextualization to support the students to start thinking critically and participated actively in the classroom, either using open-ended questions or closed questions related to the contexts given. Mrs. Anne explained that the test items were contextualized because of the prior test items'

Table 3. Analysis of construct assessment from teacher-made test items

| Test items | Assessment Construct | Students' Thinking Skills |
|--|---|--|
| Sura ... against Baya the day before (<i>Fight</i>). Please change the word in the bracket to the past form! | Vocabulary (<i>Lexical items – Verb construction</i>) | Recalling the teacher's explanation of the narrative text. |
| Who are the main characters of the story? | Theoretical concepts of the text | Recalling the facts provided in the text |
| Where did the story take place? | Theoretical concepts of the text | Identifying the elements of the story |

implementation. The students felt uncomfortable to the items since they were unfamiliar to the vocabulary used in items. Therefore, in doing this contextualization strategy, the teacher explained the meaning of test items through several modes, such as watching videos, wearing story characters' attributes, switching their voices based on the characters, and roleplaying. These kinds of modes were proved to stimulate students' engagement both in the story and test items. They seemed to be enthusiastic in responding the teacher's questions, even they enjoyed the lesson as the teacher entertained them through telling stories while assessing their literacy and higher order thinking skills by bringing their daily life contexts as illustrated in table 3.

Furthermore, this contextualization strategy, according to Kucirkova, Rowe, Oliver, and Piestrzynski (2019) is categorized as the functional levels of literacy. The strategy which was embedded to the test items allowed the students to become literate to be actively involved in certain members of society, coping with the demands of everyday life involving written language. The students were expected to apply what they have learned in the classroom in coping the problems they would encounter in their daily life. They were also habituated to engage in the multimodality text.

The teacher's statement above was supported by the data gained from the classroom observation showing the students were passive as they only concentrated on language learning without thinking about the impacts of their learning on the real-life situations. Previously, the teacher started the story through vocabulary building, meaning making, and pronunciation practice. The students merely listened to the teacher, imitated how to pronounce certain words, and answer the meaning of the words. In contrast, when the teacher implemented contextualization toward the story and items of the test, they were engaged by constructing their answers based on their personal experiences as illustrated in table 4.

In terms of higher order thinking and literacy skills, the teacher gradually introduced them through discussion in pairs or groups. The purpose of the pair discussion was

Table 4. Extract from the classroom observation

| | | |
|-----------|---|---|
| Mrs. Anne | : | How about if Sangkuriang went to the city and had a job over there. Meanwhile, Dayang Sumbi still lived in their town. Do you know neighborhood right? |
| Student A | : | Yes, it is surrounding. |
| Mrs. Anne | : | Correct. Which one is bigger, city or town? |
| Student A | : | Town. |
| Mrs. Anne | : | Yes, town, good. Now, I ask you, is there any big company in your town? |
| Student A | : | Yes. There is. |
| Mrs. Anne | : | Where is it exactly in Lembang? |
| Student A | : | No. I mean in Bandung. |
| Mrs. Anne | : | Ah, alright. You got it. Lembang is not a city. It is a town because it is smaller than the city. Bandung is a city. You will find some big companies in Bandung, not in Lembang. |

to convey the students' opinions and viewpoints on the characters of the story. The students were invited to think about the details of the story by analyzing, evaluating, and drawing inferences from their claims and arguments in this task. The class was presented with a plethora of concepts and statements which helped the students comprehend the story completely. According to the teacher, this stage was considered as a valuable session for the teacher because the students did not only understand the story, but they started thinking, considering, evaluating, and making choices and decisions about what they believed the best. This statement was in line with the idea of Kucirkova, Rowe, Oliver, and Piestrzynski (2019) claiming that in teaching literacy skills, students should be taught and assessed by using higher order thinking skills. By integrating HOTS in teaching literacy, the students were well-trained how to learn many perspectives written in the text although it was given implicitly.

4.2. Teacher-made HOTS-based Summative Assessments in Teaching Literacy

The second type of assessment implemented by the teacher to promote students' higher order thinking and literacy skills was the summative assessment that was done at the end of the learning topic. Since the topic at that time was storytelling, the teacher in the interview stated that she wanted to assess how storytelling could promote literacy and higher order thinking skills through some items made by her. She further clarified that the test items made for summative assessment were designed based on several considerations found in the formative test such as students' understanding of the vocabulary in the items, mode of items presentation, and context-relation questions. Hence, the teacher decided to deliver the oral tests connecting students' life experiences to ease them achieve the intended purposes.

Regarding the assessment construct of the summative test, the documents analysis results showed that Mrs. Anne put more emphasis on students' life context, experience, and prior knowledge. These constructs were then associated with the linguistic features of narrative texts and the content of the story. She believed that these constructs would effectively help her seeing literacy and higher order thinking skills.

In detail, the teacher provided some pictures to arrange and asked the students to make a storyline based on these pictures. Each picture was equipped with one clue where the students could construct their imaginative thinking and create the story as good as possible. The data from the classroom observation revealed that the teacher had successfully promoted students' higher order thinking and literacy skills in this summative assessment.

Table 5. Example of summative test item and student's argument

| Summative Test Item | Student's Answer |
|---|---|
|  Clue: Scared What do you think about the picture? | The girl was not scared of the giant. She ran because she wanted to fulfil her mother's advice to ignore everything that she met on the way. I remember when my mother said that I had to go home right away from school. It is a similar case. |

As an example, when the teacher showed a picture of a girl who met a giant and the given clue was “scared”, student C elaborated his ideas saying that the girl was not scared of the giant, in fact, she tried hard to fulfil the advice of her mother. Table 5 presents the picture shown by the teacher and the student's argument toward the picture.

From the Table 5, the teacher-made test items had promoted the students to express their thoughts. It was relevant to the assessment construct that put a center on students' real-life context and experience, as well as narrative language features. In comparison to the prior assessment, the students were more willing to express their critical opinions without fear of being misunderstood by the teacher in this summative assessment. In the interview, the students also stated that they felt more at ease answering the teacher's questions because they were unaware of being assessed. The students went on to say they understood the meaning of the story and how it was put together. The teacher felt confident that she had promoted students' higher order thinking and literacy skills through this type of evaluation, as evidenced by the students' arguments and viewpoints.

The teacher, at this point, has clearly seen that she discovered that some previous test items did not work well on promoting students' literacy and higher order thinking skills. She further revised the items and used them in the second meeting formative test and final

summative test. The results of the re-designed items proved that these items had successfully reach the assessment objectives. As mentioned earlier by Kucirkova, Rowe, Oliver, and Piestrzynski (2019) and Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis (2004), the teacher made-assessment can be illustrated in Figure 1.

Moreover, regarding the interpersonal communication, the teacher encouraged the students to be involved in classroom interaction. They were required to respond the teacher's questions although they did the task in pairs and groups. To do such a communication, the students were demanded to apply their prior knowledge and experience, particularly related to the story discussed. By doing so, they could extend their cognitive thinking skills through giving arguments, reasons, and even decision making and problem solving. Moreover, this type of communication will run well if the students understand the content of the story and compare it in the form of analogical reasoning, especially related to the characters' personalities portraited from the life-reality.

Instead of being engaged, understanding the whole story, and taking analogical reasoning may support the students in coping with everyday life demands. Dealing with the story discussed, the teacher identified the social awareness of the students in the situation where they were familiar and exposed to the story. These assessment items may be done by the students if the storylines were found in their life. Further, it could be interpreted that the students could cope with the story in their daily life if they already met the story before, especially it lies in her neighborhood. In contrast, they would not cope with the story in their daily life if they could only understand the story as it was written in the text.

However, in terms of the informational level of literacy in the assessment items made by the teacher, it was found this level had not been identified yet, neither from classroom observation, interview, nor document analysis. As stated by the teacher that this level seemed not to be well occupied yet in the learning process because the teacher taught that it was likely impossible to execute during the classroom interaction. Meanwhile, this case is essential to prepare the students to practice their literacy skills although in a very simple form. This is due to the teacher's understanding of the essence of literacy skills and how it is implemented in English subjects. Therefore, the teacher only taught the learning materials (story) as a text and asked the students to answer the questions correctly taken from the text. It is proved that critical thinking was not optimally taught and promoted to the students, but it is only text-based practice that the information was available in the text.

This is in line with Kucirkova, Rowe, Oliver, and Piestrzynski (2019) suggesting that a text should be taught and assessed by using higher order thinking skills. By doing so, the students were well-trained how to learn

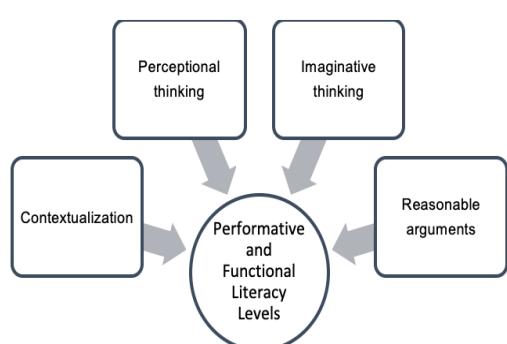


Figure 1 HOTS-based literacy assessment made by the teacher.

many perspectives written in the text although it was given implicitly. Starting from this, it is believed that students' critical thinking skills need to be taught and exposed to the students to have three levels of literacy skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the results of data analysis, some points can be concluded. First, formative and summative assessments were employed by the teacher in promoting students' higher order thinking and literacy skills through storytelling. Formative assessments were executed through contextualization in the form of vocabulary building, pronouncing words, and meaning making which were investigated in the first stage. Meanwhile, in the second meeting, the teacher gave open-ended questions, contextualizing, and employing different modes of material delivery. Summative assessment, on the other hand, was done through using picture series and providing keywords as clues to allow the students to think critically according to their perspectives.

Second, literacy skill was promoted in the levels of performative and functional. Performative level enabled the students to read the written texts only without trying to explore the messages behind the texts. In contrast, functional level was demonstrated from how the students could catch the implicit information from the text and bring them to cope with the daily life demands. As an implication of this study, it is found that the teacher should prepare themselves by applying HOTS-based learning strategies to get insightful knowledge and experiences which are valuable to accommodate them in facing the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM) focusing on literacy skills.

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