

# *Matilda's Literacy Practices in Roald Dahl's "Matilda"*

*Rizka Rachmania Putri*  
 Universitas Negeri Surabaya  
 Surabaya, Indonesia  
[rizkaputri@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:rizkaputri@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

*Pratiwi Retnaningdyah*  
 Universitas Negeri Surabaya  
 Surabaya, Indonesia  
[pratiwiretnaningdyah@unesa.ac.id](mailto:pratiwiretnaningdyah@unesa.ac.id)

**Abstract**—Literacy practices give an idea to see what people do with literacy rather than seeing it as ability in reading and writing. Roald Dahl's *Matilda* is chosen as the data because this book contains many depictions of literacy practices. This book has been broadly used to foster children's reading habit. This study is a literary study which aims to reveal Matilda's literacy practices in Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. Using textual analysis which focuses on Roald Dahl's *Matilda* as the main source of the data, this study employs New Literacy Studies to discuss the issue of this study. New Literacy Studies shows how to see literacy as social practices. To know what people do with the text, it can be analyzed from literacy event, what text is included, values, feelings, attitudes, and social relationship. The analysis shows that Matilda does literacy practices for three purposes; as pleasure, escape, and power.

**Keywords**—*New Literacy Studies; literacy practices*

## I. INTRODUCTION

New Literacy Studies focus on seeing literacy not as a set of skill and ability to read and write but as social practices [1]. It is simply what people do with literacy. The term practices here means the cultural ways of utilizing literacy [2]. It is related with the idea of studying literacy that "it is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts"[2]. There are two models of literacy that Street proposes: "autonomous" and "ideological" to best understand that literacy is an ethnographic issue or simply put as social practices. The first model "autonomous" is that literacy will affect social and cognitive practices [1]. The example of this notion is that introducing literacy to illiterate people will affect their life into better social and economic prospect and better citizens if they are literate. The second model "ideological" is that literacy as social practices is not just seen as a technical and neutral skill. It is seen as something which is embedded in socially constructed principles [1]. It is what people do with reading and writing which are rooted in their knowledge, identity, and being. The interaction between teachers and students is the example of social practices.

Under the umbrella of New Literacy Studies framework, literacy as social practices can propose such; literacy and identity, literacy and multimodal, and literacy moral values. Cheryl A. Mc Lean in *A Space Called Home: An Immigrant Adolescent's Digital Literacy Practices* [3] analyzes how Zeek, a 15-year-old Trinidad and Tobago native and American immigrant is able to use digital literacy *MySpace* and Facebook to construct, maintain, represent her identities as a Caribbean person, female adolescent, and learner. Using *MySpace* and

Facebook as digital literacy, Zeek is able to shape her diasporic identity both as Trinidad-Tobago native and American immigrant. Cynthia Lewis and Bettina Fabos in *Instant Messaging, Literacies, and Social Identities* which analyzes how 7 adolescents as users of Instant Messaging which is a form of digital literacy construct their social identities. The result shows that Instant Messaging (IM) as a form of digital literacy gives its user chance to do literacy practices and shapes their social identities. IM as the form of digital literacy shaped its user identity. For example when the users use IM as the language used they manipulated tone, voice, choice of word in order to fit their communication need, and social network where IM users designed their practices to raise their social relationship and statuses across contexts. Unconsciously, IM users construct different identities in real life and social life. Dewayani and Retnaningdyah in their book *Suara Dari Marjin* investigate how IDW uses digital literacy practices in blogging to break the negative stereotype about domestic worker by showing their writing through blogging. They want to negotiate and construct their identity. Blogging is also one way to show that negative stereotypes about domestic worker, such as stupid, illiterate, submissive, and passive are not true, to create a new pattern of the word, IDW who are smart and creative which is the way of empowering a community [4].

Researches done by Cheryl A. McLean, Cynthia Lewis, and Bettina Fabos are also the example of literacy practices and multimodality where adolescent join in a digital social network and do digital literacy practices such as design their profile in social media, send messages, and share photos. The activities they do in the digital social network include in multimodality where they can connect real life and digital network. Kathy A. Mills in *Shrek Meets Vygotsky: Rethinking Adolescents' Multimodal Literacy Practices in Schools* shows how adolescents are able to connect between popular and multimodal texts, such as movies and websites from their experiences, and media-based task [5].

The field of New Literacy Studies has other concerned with literacy as social practices in order to understand deeply about. Literacy practices and literacy events are the social theory of literacy to understand the nature of literacy. Barton and Hamilton state in their book *Local Literacies* that "literacy events are activities where literacies have a role, usually includes written texts, central to the action and there may be talk about the text. Events are observable episodes which arise from practices and shaped by them." Literacy events include texts as important part of literacy events because the study of

literacy itself is the study of texts, how they are produced and used [2]. Literacy events are simply the activities using texts in sociocultural contexts.

Literacy practices are defined as general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy [2]. Literacy practices are not observable because it includes values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationship. Literacy practices also include people's awareness of literacy, constructions, and discourses of literacy; how people talk about and make sense of literacy [2]. To put it simply, literacy practices are the series of literacy events which are repeated.

## II. METHOD

Research methodology in this study is to apply New Literacy Studies to analyze elements of literacy practices in *Matilda* by using textual analysis. This study uses Roald Dahl's *Matilda* from Puffin Books in the pdf format with the full illustration in it as the main source of the data. Quotations from the book Roald Dahl's *Matilda* related with literacy are identified and collected as the data in this study. Analyzing about literacy, New Literacy Studies is the suitable theoretical approach for this study. It sees literacy as social practices which are in line with the analysis of literacy in Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. It also offers a new approach to literacy which is not just described as a set of skill of reading and writing, but more to see what people do with literacy. Steps in analysing the data are; first step is read Roald Dahl's *Matilda* in the form of pdf to understand the story. The second step is close reading Roald Dahl's *Matilda* to find words, phrases, sentences, narration, and conversation which are the data for analysis. The third step is coding relevant words, phrases, sentences, narration, and conversation into some codes. The fourth step is selecting and connecting relevant codes. The fifth step is using New Literacy Studies as the theoretical framework to depict literacy practices. The sixth is answering the statement problems and draw the conclusion.

## III. DISCUSSION

1) Literacy can serve a different purpose based on the people who do literacy. One purpose of literacy in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* is that literacy is used to seek pleasure. Matilda reads books for most of her day. Clark and Rumbold [6] state that reading for pleasure refers to the activity of reading which is based on one's free will hoping for contentment from that activity. Reading for pleasure usually includes text, time, and place that suit the reader. Matilda's favorite place to read is a public library where she can spend hours to read many books.

The library is only 'ten minutes walk' [7] from her house. She goes to the public library in most of her afternoon when her father leaves for work, her mother plays bingo, and her brother goes to school. In public library, she can find many interesting books to read which she cannot get in her house. Thus, it is very pleasant for Matilda to go to the public library every day.

**"The walk took only ten minutes and this allowed her two glorious hours sitting quietly ... in a cosy corner devouring one book after another."** [7]

In the public library, Matilda spends 'two glorious hours' to find interesting books and read them. It is very unusual for four years old child spending most of her time to read books while other four years old children are actively playing with the toys because this is a stage of exploration development [8]. Books are like the replacement of toys for Matilda because her family never facilitates her with toys. Her family just asks her to watch television when they are busy outside the house and Matilda is left alone in the house. Thus, Matilda uses books instead of toys as media in her exploration stage. She can observe the shape of the book, open the book from page to page to look what is inside the book, and read the sentences in the book because she has been able to read since she was three years old. As a result, instead of playing toys, Matilda reads books as her exploration. She finds it as a joyful activity thus she can spend two hours in public library.

Matilda also finds her favorite spot to read in the public library. It is in 'a cozy corner' of the public library, the place where Matilda finds it comfortable to read books. Reading many interesting books in a cozy corner of the public library is a perfect combination for Matilda to get happiness from reading. Matilda's favorite spot makes her more enthusiastic doing her favorite activity. Finding the right place and text which are suitable for a reader is an important aspect which supports reading to seek pleasure [6]. Matilda surely finds her favorite place even her favorite spot to read books. She also has many choices on which books she will read. A lovely place to read and a lovely book is a unity that reading is pleasurable.

2) Literacy offers an act of escapism for the reader. Once someone reads books he will forget about all the problems in his life and travel into a different world in the story. Usually, one of the reasons why someone reads books is that a desire to get an escape from the pressure someone gets in his life. A survey of Australian reading habit in 2016 shows that 55 percent of the participants say that they read for escaping from reality and being immersed in the fantasy world [9]. This survey shows how there are many people that use reading for an escape. In Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, Matilda's reading practices can be categorized as an act to be able to escape from her real world. She starts to treat herself not to bother about her family habit in watching television, by reading a book, and being absorbed in that book [7].

Matilda's family is very addicted to television. They cannot spend a day without watching television. Matilda's father's first thing to do whenever he comes back from work is switch on the television and watch it. Matilda's mother is just the same as her father. She is always glued to the television watching American soap-opera [7]. Watching television is their daily routine in the evening as they have supper. Unfortunately, Matilda does not like watching television at all. It is because she thinks that 'there is more life' [7] she will get from reading books than watching television. Although Matilda does not like the television, as a four years old child, she has to follow this routine.

**"Matilda, happened to be curled up in an arm-chair in the corner, totally absorbed in a book. .... She kept right on reading."** [7]

Matilda has been in an arm-chair with her book when her father comes home. Matilda's father directly turns on the

television and the program of the television blares [7]. Yet, Matilda keeps on her position and reads the book. She does not bother her father and the television although the sound of it is so ghastly [7]. She focuses on her reading and does not even care what happens in her surroundings. She reads *The Red Pony* by John Steinbeck in front of her father bravely. She is 'totally absorbed in a book' and involved in the story inside the book. The story that Matilda reads in *The Red Pony* completely offers an interesting journey to experience than watching an American soap-opera. By reading the book, Matilda can give a distance for herself from her family's activity. Her body is in the living room with her family member watching television, but her soul and her mind travel to the world inside the story and experience the journey of the character inside the book she reads.

Reading is like a savior for Matilda because by reading Matilda can get a different experience in life from the story in the book. Whilst her real life is just about how to deal with the family who is so hooked up with television and not supportive toward her, fantasy world inside the book offers her a beautiful, amazing, and joyful life and experience. At the time Matilda reads books, she can travel into the fantasy world in the story. Thus, she does not aware of her surroundings because she is in the fantasy world of the book. The use of reading as Matilda's way to get different journey about life is also stated by Sarah van Dongen. Dongen [10] argues that reading is Matilda's way to escape from her real world. This is also related with A report from Quick Reads, in partnership with Dr. Josie Billington [11] which shows that 58 percent of readers value reading as their escape from the real world. Thus, it is clear that reading books can offer escapism for the reader because many people read because they want to forget the problems in their life and enter the journey in the story which usually offers an interesting experience. Matilda is one of those people who know the value of reading as an escape.

3) Williams and Zenger [12] state that literacy as power is about control and action. Doing literacy practices can inspire someone to have control over people and to take action relates to the condition. Williams and Zenger give the example of action hero movie where literacy practices are part of the hero's power to control and outwit fewer power people. Usually, this hero uses literacy practices to take over the control from his superiors, bureaucrats, scientists, and villains [7]. The ability of reading or writing is not enough to show literacy as power, but the skill to use literacy to create power is the main thing.

Matilda's literacy practices are not just about her reading. She also does writing. Writing practice that she does in the school shows how smart she is in using her telekinesis ability and her writing as her power to attack the wicked Mrs. Trunchbull, her headmaster. The special thing about Matilda is that she is a girl with telekinesis ability and she knows how to use it in a right way. By the help of telekinesis ability, Matilda could move a chalk to write on the blackboard [7].

**"It's writing something!" screamed Nigel. "The chalk is writing something!"....."Miss Honey, at the side of the room glanced swiftly at Matilda."** [7]

Mrs. Trunchbull is a wicked and dangerous headmaster in Matilda's school. She is like evil for all people in the school. It is because of her rude attitude toward the children. She is also

Miss Honey's aunt who takes all of Miss Honey's inheritance from her father. She causes Miss Honey living in a poverty and difficult life. Matilda who is happened to be so close with Miss Honey feels pity toward her teacher's life. She wants to help Miss Honey take revenge to Mrs. Trunchbull. She gets that chance to do her action when Mrs. Trunchbull teaches her class. By using her telekinesis ability, Matilda moves the chalk to write threatening sentences on the blackboard. She makes it as if it is Miss Honey's father's soul who wants Mrs. Trunchbull giving back Miss Honey's wages and house. If she does not do it, he will come and get her like she got him [7]. This threatening sentence written on the blackboard effectively creates fear and guilt on Mrs. Trunchbull; she faints on the floor.

Telekinesis itself is an ability to move things with the power of the mind [13]. Telekinesis is purely a powerful ability because it needs full control of the power of the mind. By using telekinesis actually, Matilda has shown that she has control of her mind to create such strength to move things around. Moreover, in term of literacy, power is the ability to know how, when, and why to display the literacy practices[12]. Matilda surely knows the reason she has to use her telekinesis ability to write threatening sentences for Mrs. Trunchbull, the time she has to do it; when Mrs. Trunchbull teaches her class, and the way she punishes Mrs. Trunchbull by creating situation as if it is the ghost of Miss Honey's father who moves the chalk. Thus, it is in line with Williams and Zenger's statement about power in literacy.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Literacy practices in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* are classified based on its purpose. One thing is that literacy can be used to seek pleasure. Literacy as pleasure is showed when Matilda enjoys most of her time reading books in the library. She has her favorite spot which is in a cozy corner of the library. In the library, Matilda can choose whatever kinds of books that she wants to read. She reads based on her own will and without any pressure from other people. This depiction of literacy as pleasure is in line with Clark and Rumbold's argument that reading as pleasure is based on one's free will which includes text, time, and place that suit the reader [7].

Another thing is literacy can give an act of escapism. This is shown when Matilda uses reading to escape her from her family routine, watching TV, which she does not like. She still follows her family routine by sitting in the living room but she reads book instead of watching the TV. By reading book Matilda does not have to bother herself to focus on the TV program. Her body might in the living room pretend to watch the TV but actually, her soul and her mind are in the story she reads. In fact, a number of readers say that they read because of the need of an escape from the real world [9]. Thus, it can be said that literacy can be used to get away from reality.

More importantly, literacy can give power. The concept of power in literacy as stated by Williams and Zenger is that about control and action. Matilda who is happened to have telekinesis ability uses it to help Miss Honey takes revenge to Mrs. Trunchbull. She moves a chalk to write threatening sentences for Mrs. Trunchbull and makes it as if it is Miss Honey's dead father who writes it. Telekinesis itself is an ability which needs

the power to control the mind. Thus, Matilda's writing is one of literacy as power because it makes Matilda to have control and action.

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