

Reading Graded Readers: A Recommended Activity for Helping EFL Beginners Acquire English and Its Culture

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Abstract. School Literacy Movement (Gerakan Literasi Sekolah/GLS) has been implemented in all levels of schools in Indonesia to boost the students' reading habit. Unfortunately, the reading materials provided by parents and school are mostly written in Bahasa Indonesia. The reasons for providing such collection is to make the students feel comfortable when reading them which in the end will make them enjoy reading. However, as English is a compulsory subject in Indonesia, and it is widely acknowledged that the mastery of the language is important for the students' future, it will be advantageous if parents and schools also provide graded books written in English for the movement. This paper will discuss the benefits of reading English graded materials for helping the students acquire not only English but also other aspects of life presented in the materials which might make them become more cosmopolitan individuals.

Keywords: Graded reader, SLA, School Literacy Movement

1 Introductions

It is widely understood that Indonesian students' reading skill is low. Since Indonesia participated in PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) in 2000, it was revealed that the students' ability in reading was still below the average of those of other countries. There are a number of variables that make it happens, among others is the low reading habit of the nation in general. In order to increase the reading habit, since 2015 the Ministry of National Education (now aka the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research and Technology) issued the so-called School Literacy Movement (Gerakan Literasi Sekolah/GLS). The movement requires all level of schools in the country to schedule a fifteen-minute reading activity prior to the regular school time-table for all students and teachers (Panduan Gerakan Literasi Sekolah di SMP, 2016). During the activity, students and teacher are required to read any documents (books, magazines, newspapers, story-books, novels etc.) of their own choice. They are allowed to read their own documents, but when they do not have one, they can read the ones provided by the school.

To make the GLS successful, schools provide collections of reading materials in the reading corner of every classroom. The collection varies in terms of topics and genres to cater the different interests of the prospective readers in the classroom. Unfortunately, a preliminary observation

during my visit to some schools showed that the reading materials available in the reading corners of some schools are mostly written in Bahasa Indonesia. The reasons for providing such a collection is to make the students feel comfortable when reading, which in the end, will make them enjoy reading. In other words, it can be said that the GLS is a kind of an extensive reading program that will hopefully boost the students' reading habit.

Since Indonesia got its independence, English is one of the compulsory subjects in Indonesia starting from the junior high school level. Even, English is one of the subjects tested in the national leaving examination (UNAS) in both junior and senior high schools. This is due to the fact that it is widely acknowledged that the mastery of the language is important for the students' future. That is why, parents tend to send their children to (elementary) schools which offers English in the curriculum (Lestari, 2003). Even in 2003, the government issued a decree for the establishment of *RSBI (Rintisan Sekolah Bertaraf Internasional)* in certain cities or regents provided that the facilities and human resources (in this case teachers who could teach the subjects in English) were available in the area. In this special program, some subjects (Math and Science) were taught using English as the language of instruction. Public enthusiasm for this program was quite high as seen from the number of application to enroll in this program. Unfortunately, this promising program was then cancelled in 2013 after a Judicial Review was held in the Constitutional Court of Indonesia (*Mahkamah Konstitusi*) (<https://www.republika.co.id/berita/nasional/hukum/13/01/08/mgat12-mk-bubarkan-rsbi>). This is due to the fact that such kind of education was consequently made the school fee increased and only the haves could afford it, made education unfair for those who were financially disadvantaged. Public high enthusiasm in the RSBI program partly showed that they were aware of the importance of English for the students' future, both in life and education. Seeing the public awareness of the importance of English for the students' future, while fact shows that Indonesian students are still struggling to achieve the objectives of the teaching of English, i.e., to make the students able to communicate in English, it is important that facilities to enhance its acquisition are provided.

One of the ways to achieve such an objective is by exposing the students to the target language, i.e., English. Since English is a foreign language in Indonesia, most students are not exposed to it in daily practice. It does mean that other activities that make the students get exposed to the language should be made possible. It is true that English songs, TV programs, films, newspapers, books, etc. can be some good resources for students to learn English. However, when the level of difficulty of the documents is not well-controlled, it could be a source of frustration for the struggling learners (Jacobs, 2014). That is why the provision of graded materials in English is recommended since learners will build their language competence when they understand the input (both written and oral) which in Krashen's (2011) term known as 'comprehensible input'.

As mentioned previously, reading corner's collection at most schools is at present dominated by books written in Bahasa Indonesia. However, if teachers and parents agree that English is important for the students' future, an additional of some English graded reader to the collection will

be an advantage for those who want to improve the English skills and proficiency. This due to the fact that graded readers offer some advantages for those who want to acquire a target language (Lestari 2010).

As previously mentioned that GLS is an activity to make the students love reading, which in the end, help them broaden their insights. In order that the students love reading, they should be exposed to different variety of readings of their interests, popularly known as extensive reading activity. Even, when it deals with L1 learning, beginners should be first exposed to graded readers. Reading collection for young children, for example, should be the ones with pictures and contain only one or two short, simple sentences on each page. When the children are getting older and their reading skills are getting better, the books will have lesser pictures but they will have more number of sentences with more complex structure on each page. The more advanced the students' reading proficiency, the higher the graded reader they will read. The same formula will apply for reading in L2 or in a foreign language.

English is the most popular working language among international organizations in the world. Even in the ASEAN, a regional organization which member states do not use English as L1, uses English as the working language. In addition, the fact that English is also used in most academic publication in the world shows that English is an important language to learn. That is why it is natural that parents in Indonesia consider learning English is salient (Huda, 1997).

2 Graded readers and students' language acquisition

A number of efforts have been done by both government and parents to help increase the students' English mastery. Since late 1990s, the government has legalized English as an optional or local content subject for Elementary Schools in Indonesia if the school could provide good English teachers and sufficient facilities for the learning process (Decree of the Ministry of Education and Culture No.0487/4/1992, Chapter VIII). As a result, most elementary schools in the country (especially the ones in the cities, towns, and suburbs) offer English as a local content subject regardless of the condition of the schools (Lestari, 2003). In addition, since parents consider English as an important subject for their children, they send their children to English courses. As a result, English courses are also mushrooming in the country. However, the efforts are not working very well. Statistics shows that the latest average scores of 2019 UN (National Examination) for English at both Junior and Senior High Schools were around 50s of 0-100 scale (https://hasilun.puspendik.kemdikbud.go.id/#2019!smp!capaian_nasional!99&99&999!T&T&T&T&1&!1!&).

The general objective of the teaching of English in Indonesia is to make students able to use the target language for communication. That is why, when teaching English, it is suggested that teacher uses the target language as much as possible as much as possible. However, since in Indonesia English is a foreign language and the official and national language is Bahasa Indonesia,

it is difficult to practice such a suggestion. In addition, the fact that in Indonesia people use Bahasa Indonesia and the regional languages for daily communication make it difficult for students to practice to use English in the society (Sadtono, 1997). As a result, the students' exposure to English is very limited. English is only practiced in the classroom. Even, some teachers do not use English intensively during classes since they think that it is useless to speak in English if the students do not understand it ().

Language can be acquired through intensive exposure (Krashen, 2007). It means that if one wants to acquire a language, he should expose himself to the language as much as he can. One of the ways to expose oneself to a target language is by reading any document written in the language, widely known as extensive reading. In an extensive reading activity, students are allowed to read as many documents of their own choice as they wish. That is why in such an activity documents of various topics and of different level of difficulties should be provided in order to cater students' interests and their language mastery.

In relation to English as a compulsory subject in both junior and junior high schools, it is widely understood that teacher and students mostly concentrated on perusing the textbooks provided by the government or chosen by the schools in order to prepare the students for the National Examination/UN (when UN was still applicable until 2019). As a result, the students were not exposed to sufficient documents to read since the focus of the teaching of English was on how to train the students to do the national English examination even though the teachers understood that intensive exposure to the target language was one of the variables that supported the success of language acquisition. Even though research shows that extensive reading is the key to earn high scores on reading exams, in a situation where score is considered important for graduation, a short-sighted or 'practical' view of exam preparation is often practiced which results in making teachers find some ways to help students successful in doing the exam by giving them a lot of exercises similar to that of the exam questions (Siddiqie, 2011). An informal interview with some English teachers revealed that they put the first priority on students' achievement as reflected from the UN score since it was the yardstick used by the society to measure the success of education in a school. The launch of the GLS since 2015 and the elimination of the UN since 2020 should be used as a starting point to make the teaching of English more focus on acquisition of the communicative skills.

GLS has been practiced in all schools since it was launched in 2015. Schools now provide books and other written materials for the students to read for 15 minutes prior to the scheduled subject every day. Those reading materials are provided by the schools or donated by parents or charity organizations whose attention are put on education. However, it seems that the reading collection at schools is dominated by documents written in Bahasa Indonesia. Since students do not only learn Bahasa Indonesia but also English and maybe some other regional and foreign languages at school, it will be a lot better if graded readers in those languages are also provided. This is to give the students the opportunity to get a balanced access in order to get wider exposure to the languages they learn. The provision of graded reader for an extensive reading activity will help students get

exposed to the languages in addition to that of the teachers' speech and the one presented in the textbooks.

The fact that English is a compulsory subject at junior and senior high schools in Indonesia and its important roles in education, business, and technology makes English become the centre of attention in education. That is why providing English graded readers at reading corners at school will be an advantage for some reasons. Firstly, because the language used in the graded readers are well-controlled in terms of the vocabulary and grammatical structures it will make the students able to read them comfortably as long as they choose readers of the correct level. As a result, the students will be eager to read more and more. In this way, exposure to the language will be more intensive and this will make the students enjoy reading. While enjoying the graded readers, the students' knowledge on vocabulary, sentence structures, and different word forms and functions will increase (Delfi and Yamat, 2017).

Stoller (2015) claimed that reading is the most recommended activity to help students learn to read and improve their reading skills. Several studies show that there is a positive correlation between extensive reading and mastery of language components and language skills for EFL learners (Lee & Hsu, 2009; Mermelstein, 2014; Edy, 2014). When reading graded readers, students will face a text of their own choice that suits their interests and of their language level that makes them enjoy reading. In such a text, the sentence structures and the vocabulary are well-selected to meet the language skills of the prospective readers. Krashen (1978) in Saville-Troike (2006) says language acquisition happens only when there is comprehensible input. It means that in order that students can acquire language the level of difficulty of the input should be not far from their current level. That is why it is recommended that students should be given the chance to read graded readers outside the formal language classroom since it has been proved that ELT course book used in the classroom provides only minimum opportunity for the students to develop their vocabulary in order that they can read academic text well (Matsuoka and Hirsch, 2010).

A study on the effects of extensive reading on the students' reading proficiency was done by Lituanas, et al., (2001) in a school where students were of financially disadvantaged families in Mindanao, Southern Philippines. The study lasted for six months in which the experimental and control groups experienced different treatments for their remedial teaching class, a forty-minute activity in addition to the regular English class hour. During the study, the experimental group did an extensive reading activity in which the students read graded readers of their own choice provided by the school and did some activities related to the texts while the control group was taught using the material presented in the textbook, such as pronunciation, reading and reciting poems, and reading short selections. The results showed that the group whose time was spent for extensive reading activities achieved higher reading scores compared to those whose extra time was spent for discussing the textbook.

3 Graded readers and cultural values

Research shows that extensive reading help improve not only the students' language competence, i.e., vocabulary, grammar and spelling knowledge, reading and writing skills, but also knowledge of the world (Krashen, 2011 and Renandya, 2007 in Jacobs, 2014). This is due to fact that when practicing extensive reading, students read a number of simplified documents of various genres both fiction and non-fiction. As a result, in addition to the improvement on language proficiency, they will also gain the information presented in the documents or popularly known as the content of the texts. When they read non-fiction, they will obtain information on related field. When they read fiction which normally present problems faced by human beings, their knowledge on humanity will increase.

Graded readers present both fiction and non-fiction materials. Students can choose any which is suitable with their interests. As graded readers present texts in meaningful context, they will also bring along the culture of the subjects discussed in the text. For example when the text presents how rice is cultivated in Java, Javanese culture will also indirectly be presented in the text which might be different from that of the Balinese culture that is presented in a text discussing *Subak*, the practice of cultivating rice in Bali. Even though both texts present the same topic, i.e., how to cultivate rice, the culture elements of the setting will also be exposed.

Those who prefer reading fiction collection will also be exposed to the cultural elements of the setting of the story. When reading *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dicken, for example, readers will be introduced to how life in the nineteenth century's Britain even though the document is the simplified one. As a result, they will learn a piece of British culture as it is depicted in the story since it is said that literature is the mirror of the society.

In addition to the cultural elements in the fiction, literature offers the advantages of presenting an interesting multimedia experience and introducing more variety and more extensive exposure to English (Zoreda and Vivaldo-Lima, 2008). Even though the use of graded literary texts for ELT was criticized because they were considered inauthentic (Bamford and Day, 1997 in Zoreda and Vivaldo-Lima, 2008) when the communicative language teaching was popular, it regained its popularity by the end of the 20th century for the potential to promote language learning (Day and Bamford, 1998). In addition to the linguistics and psychological benefits, research shows that the utilization of graded readers increases the students' motivation, reading speed, vocabulary development, discourse awareness, and meaning-focused input and output (Waring, 1997 and Nation, 2004 in Zoreda and Vivaldo-Lima, 2008).

Language and culture are strongly intertwined. That is why when learning a language, learners will 'automatically' learn the culture of the society who use the language. By exposing the students to the graded readers, what ever the type of the texts are, students will automatically exposed to the culture. Moreover, when students are exposed to graded readers which are of translated texts from different parts of the world (as found in <https://reader.letsreadasia.org/?uiLang=4846240843956224>) they will learn different cultures

depicted in the texts. By so doing, in addition to the improvement of the language skills and language components, graded readers will also enrich the students' cultural knowledge.

4 Closing Remarks

The provision of a collection of graded readers with multicultural setting will help students increase the general knowledge of the world they live in. Hopefully, by reading a variety of English graded materials will help them acquire not only English but also other aspects of life presented in the materials which might make them become more cosmopolitan individuals. This is due to the fact that successful English learners are those who cannot only earn high scores in examination, but also those who can use the language for communication. To achieve the goal, the provision of a wide variety of graded readers which present both local, regional, and global settings should be provided so that learners could recognize that English is an international language. Bao (2008) states that graded readers written based on local culture ingredients can easily damage learners' curiosity and novelty, while the ones which are written based on original English books are mostly Anglo (American)-centric (Altan,1995).

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