

# ESTABLISHING A RICH LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TO SUPPORT YOUNG LEARNERS' ENGLISH LITERACY SKILLS IN BALI

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a study that examined how a 'rich language environment' could help Balinese primary school students progress with their literacy skills in English. The language environment comprised various texts from which learners were expected to work independently on reading and writing. The materials were graded in terms of complexity: word, sentence and text levels. The study employed the distinctive development model proposed by Dick and Carey (1990). The development of text materials and activities was preceded by a needs analysis and piloted in five primary schools in Bali. The impact of intensive exposure to a rich language learning environment beyond the classroom was found to have a positive impact on student literacy skills. The findings also reveal that the more difficult the text-related activity, the slower the improvement in literacy skills. Nevertheless some improvement was observable even for the most challenging task of writing in English.

**Keywords:** literacy skills, rich language learning environment

## Introduction

Primary English Language Teaching (PELT) has become a popular trend in non English speaking countries all over the world in the last two decades. English is now considered as a global commodity so many countries have

allocated significant funds and substantial effort to improve the quality of EFL teaching and learning in their schools (Whitehead, 2007). In short, English is no longer viewed a school subject but rather as an important component in basic education (Hayes, 2007).

Government policy about offering English in primary schools began in Indonesia in 1994. The Department of National Education at the provincial level was allowed to decide whether or not primary schools in certain areas needed to include English as local content in the curriculum. Only a small number of urban public primary schools in Bali ran English classes in the first few years of the implementation of the policy. This was due to limited human resources in Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) and the absence of learning tools and facilities that could support young learners to progress effectively with their English.

Growth of enthusiasm in local communities for children to attend schools that offered English subjects inspired the Department of National Education to run a pilot project on English in selected Indonesian primary schools in 2008. Ten master trainers from each of the five provinces involved in the project were sent for a Train the Trainers program in the Indonesian capital city Jakarta in the first year, and the same number of prospective trainers in the second year. The impact of this pilot project in Bali was overwhelming. Young learners in Balinese primary schools involved in the project were enthusiastic and motivated to learn English. The master trainers disseminated new and innovative strategies for teaching English for young learners to English teachers in their districts. As a result, teachers seemed to have a change of mindset; from teaching about the language to teaching how to use the language. Teachers were encouraged to facilitate the young learners to experience the language use through songs, stories, and games.

However, the children's enthusiasm was not supported by a positive language learning environment. For example, English was allocated only for 2 x 35 minutes per week during the pilot project. This allocation barely maintained learners' enthusiasm for learning English. They had to wait for a week to have another English lesson, based on informal interviews with some young learners, sometimes it takes a long time before the next English lesson follows. Meanwhile, learning materials to support English language exposure beyond the classroom are also not available.

Scott & Ytreberg (2004) point out that enthusiasm and motivation for learning should be maintained and improved through time. In the context of TEYL in Bali, the effort to maintain learners' enthusiasm to learn English has probably not been taken as a serious issue. Teachers who teach English for young learners usually have other roles in the school. First, as the class teacher he or she is responsible for carrying out the daily routines of the classroom that are relevant to all school subjects. Second, such teachers have usually had just some quick training for English language. Mostly they did not have adequate English and also lacked experience in teaching English. So they might feel that their responsibility for English language was only during the allocated 35 minute lesson and the rest of their time was for teaching their other subjects. Thus, maintaining pupil enthusiasm to learn English does not seem to be any one teacher's concern in the primary school. This situation as observed in Bali inspired the author researcher to develop a language learning environment which is rich. That is, easily accessed, readily available, various in forms and with an eye-catching appearance. The objective was to attract young learners' attention as well as to help them learn independently, especially in reading and writing English.

This article describes how the rich language learning environment (RLLE) was developed and how it was trialled with primary school English learners. An evaluation is offered about how the RLLE affected pupil literacy skills in English.

## **Literature Review**

Studies on TEYL in Indonesia in general, or Bali in particular, commonly focus on strategies to improve classroom instructions. This includes in-service training for teachers, curriculum development, implementation of new strategies for teaching, or development of teaching materials (see for example Padmadewi, et.al.,2009). In other words, most studies are concerned with the intellectual quality of the pedagogical dimension, for example, initiatives to improve the quality of formal instructions in a standard classroom. These types of studies usually end up with recommendations for methods and strategies for teaching.

However, what seems to have been seemed ignored in the usual TEYL literature is the fact that learners only have limited formal exposure to English inside the classroom. Classroom observation in English classes conducted by the author found that teachers were the only available source of learning in the classroom, and a textbook was the only learning material. Yelland (2006), points out that learning a language (especially a foreign language) should ideally be supported by a 'rich language learning environment' so that children can learn through real contexts. In line with this, Watanabe (2009) emphasizes that learning should not only occur inside the class only, but also outside of the class in the learners' convenient time.

When formal English language teaching for young learners is properly practiced, there is a potency pertaining to competitive human resources in the future (Mitchell & Myles, 2004 in Hayes, 2007). There are at least two arguments for why it is important to begin the teaching of English early in primary schools in Bali. First, research has established that young learners possess a flexible language acquisition capacity in the brain that makes them learn a new language relatively faster than adults (Long, 1990). Second, Bali is an international tourist destination, therefore there is a real need for proficiency in English among adult workers. Balinese people have positive attitudes towards the language and visiting native speakers of the language. They generally demonstrate strong motivation to learn the language (Lamb, 2003; Artini, 2006, 2009b). Thus, Balinese parents have an expectation that their children will be able to speak English in the future. This has a positive impact on children's motivation to learn English.

Unfortunately, since the pilot project on English in Primary School was terminated in 2010, there has been a rather demotivating policy approach at the regional level about PELT in Bali. The time allocated has been reduced to only 35 minutes per week. The teachers have become overburdened because they have to teach 24 hours of different subjects a week for the certification program they are required to undertake. As a result, in the 35 minutes of in-class English teaching and learning per week, learners mainly complete a worksheet, which is followed up by the teacher checking to see if what they have done is right or wrong. Considering the expectations of the Balinese community about the provision of a quality English program in primary schools, something obviously needs to be done.

The rich language learning environment (RLLE) in the context of the present research was developed by adapting the theoretical framework of *multiple literacy experiences* (Winch, et.al.,2006) where learners are exposed to different kinds of texts and sources. RLLE comprises different types of texts that take into consideration learners' language needs, children's learning characteristics and real life contexts for children. The materials must be attractive to the children with interesting illustrations or pictures. RLLE is considered a promising way to provide primary school students with opportunities to learn English in addition to formal in-class learning. RLLE provides different types of texts to attract learners to observe, pay attention to, and follow up by doing independent work in RLLE journals. The independent work here includes writing, listing topical vocabularies, and using everyday expressions and stories. All those activities contextually support the development of literacy skills in English. The materials are exposed to the learners every day on a specially designed display board in the classroom that is easily understood and organized in an interesting way.

## Research Questions

This study sought answers to the following research questions;

- (1) How should RLLE be developed?
- (2) How do Balinese primary school students react to exposure to RLLE in their school?
- (3) How does RLLE influence the students' literacy skills in English?

## Methods

This study follows Dick and Carey's (1990) model of educational research and development that comprises eight stages: needs analysis, instructional analysis, learners and context analysis, setting up goals, assessment instrument development, instructional strategy development, instructional material development and selection, summative evaluation development, and implementation. The subjects of the study were Grades 4, 5, and 6 of five schools previously involved in the pilot project of English in Primary

Schools in 2008- 2009. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select five out of 20 schools formerly involved in the pilot project. The five schools were located in three different regencies of Bali. The reasons for selecting these schools was because the English teachers there had experienced being trained by the master trainers on teaching English in Primary Schools as mentioned above.

The RLLE materials were developed by the author in the form of various texts with illustrative pictures. The materials were graded and every week one set of materials was exposed on the display board in front of each classroom. As mentioned previously, the materials adapted the proposition of Winch et.al. (2006), that experiences with various kinds of texts could help improve children's literacy skills. In this study, the concept of multiple literacy experiences was interpreted as providing learners with different types of texts that through systematic exposure would help pupils improve their independent learning skills as well as literacy in English. The materials followed the English teaching syllabus so that what the children read outside the formal timetable was connected with, or related to, what they learned within the 35 minute per week lesson. The various texts comprised: a) *topical vocabulary*, b) *everyday expressions*, c) *grammar focus*, d) *language games* and e) *time for stories*. These are described briefly below.

a) *Topical Vocabulary*

There was presentation of words relevant to the topics in the curriculum. For example, for the topic of 'family', the students were exposed to the words *father*, *mother*, *older sister*, *younger brother*, and so on, with pictures. These words were displayed on the board and students were expected to come and see, read, remember or copy them down in their journals.

b) *Everyday Expressions*

These included everyday expressions relevant to the topics in the curriculum. For example, for the topic of Parts of Body, students were exposed to expressions like: *I have a headache*, *She has short hair*, and so on. In the journal they voluntarily filled in the provided speech bubbles with appropriate expressions from the display.

c) *Grammar Focus*

Here students were exposed to sentences that emphasized the grammar of English. The sentences were repeated in the hope that students could judge the patterns on their own. For the topic of Transportation, for example, expressions of meaning were illustrated in the sentences like: *Lily goes to school by bicycle. Mr. Jaya goes to work by car.* Pictures assisted in understanding. Students were expected to copy or rewrite the sentences in their journals.

d) *Language Games*

This text type comprised language learning games such as *Spider Web* that were filled in by the students with vocabulary from the display; or *Hidden Message*, in which students discover a message by using clues. This kind of game activity does not need the learners to work in groups. The individual language learning game helps students recognize words and their meanings as well as the correct spelling.

e) *Time for Stories*

This is the longest form of text. A story was written on loose pages. Every week, only two pages were displayed so that students became curious to know how the story went. The stories were specially designed to engage the topic of the English lessons. Every week students copied the story and answered comprehension questions in their journals. They were also motivated to create their own questions to be answered by their peers.

The five types of texts relevant to the activities described above were developed from the English syllabus for Grades 4, 5 and 6 so that the formal in-class and RLLE materials were complementary to one another. Illustrations in the form of pictures or photos were specially created or were downloaded from on-line resources which were properly referenced. As mentioned previously, this research involved five schools, in which three classes were observed in every school (Grade 4, 5 and 6), with approximately 400 primary school students. In addition to preliminary observation, and trialing the newly developed materials, interviews with students and teachers

were also conducted. Before the exposure to RLLE materials, a pre-test on students' ability to read and write in English was carried out. After the three month trial period of display and activities, a literacy post-test was conducted.

## Results and Discussion

It was found that the variety of texts that were displayed on the board in front of Grade 4, 5, and 6 classrooms effectively attracted the attention of the students. As soon as they left their seats for recess, they flocked attentively to look at every part of the materials set out. On the first two days, student only looked at the materials, and then on the third day, some students stated doing work on their journals. Subsequently, more and more students worked on their journals every day. They either copied words into their journals, filled in the speech bubbles with everyday expressions or answered questions about the story. They either completed the activity individually, in pairs or in groups of three or four. Every time they finished one set of work, they showed it to their teacher who then stamped their work with a smiley face.

It was observed that students reacted positively to the display of text materials. This is indicated in the following interview excerpt:

#S12/B4: *Materinya bagus, saya suka...*

[The materials are good, I like them ...]

#S21/S5: *Gambarnya lucu-lucu, ada yang seperti adik saya.*

[The pictures are funny, one looks like my younger sibling]

The second quote indicates that the children were at first more interested in the pictures and illustrations. This is evaluated as positive in attracting their interest. Wherever possible, locally relevant images were used so the students could relate to them. The following are examples of photos for vocabulary related to the topic of Family:





Illustration 01: Pictures to introduce Topical Vocabulary about family in the RLLE.

It is assumed that the strength of the pictures or illustrations was in their close fit to the everyday life of the children who were predominantly Balinese. In addition, both diversity of images and authenticity of photos added to the interpretive value of textual materials.

### *Students' Literacy Skills in English before and after RLLE*

Prior to the trial of the RLLE materials, students' ability to read and write in English was assessed. The instrument for assessment tested: (1) vocabulary (unscrambling, selecting appropriate words, filling in blanks), (2) sentence and expression (reordering words to make sentences, to complete sentences), and (3) writing up simple descriptive texts. Scoring was not only based on the pre-test but also on student grades in English.

In general, the primary school students were initially found to have very low literacy skills in English. For example, in Grade 4, most could not spell the word 'Friday' properly. They instead wrote: *Fritdy*, *Fride*, or *Frydy*. This is probably due to the limited time for English in the classroom, or the focus of learning was unclear. However, when asked to name the days of the week in English, they did not seem to have any problem.

Ability to spell words properly may not actually be the focus of the teaching of English in primary schools. However, it is an important part of communicating in English. So if there are strategies that could help students learn spelling effectively and independently, such strategies should be given consideration. It was found that after three months of intensive exposure to RLLE materials, the children’s comprehension and spelling of common vocabulary words was better. For the same items as in the pre test, in the post-test learners also demonstrated improvement in their ability to rewrite sentences or expressions correctly and with confidence. The following table shows student literacy scores before and after the trial.

Table 01: Comparison of Literacy Skill Scores Before and After the Trial

School	Literacy skill scores								
	WORDS			SENTENCES/EXPRESSI			SIMPLE WRITING TEXT		
	Before			Before			Before		
	After			After			After		
	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
SD No 1 Sulahan	33.6 57.2	43.7 59.4	23 50.2	22.4 30.7	38.1 45.3	26 40.2	9.3 22.1	39 47.1	25.8 40.3
SD No 2 Cempaga	6.9 37.1	20.2 40.7	12.3 32.4	17.6 27.2	30.4 34.4	36.3 38.1	20 28.2	32.8 40.2	29.5 36.4
SD No 7 Pedungan	26.8 40.5	22.8 39.4	32.8 44.4	12.4 22.1	21.6 27.6	14.4 20.2	20.2 30.1	24.2 41.3	28.2 41.1
SD No 1 Kayubihi	26.2 46.2	28.8 45.1	22.2 40.7	20.4 30.5	22.6 34.1	24.6 25.6	28.4 29.9	29.1 39.2	28.2 35.6
SD 2 Muham madyah	12.2 31.1	20.1 40.4	10.2 33.1	18.4 20.6	20.2 24.9	19.2 27.1	16.8 22.2	18.2 24.2	5.2 16.7
AVERAGE Before After Improvement	21.1 42.4 100%	27.1 45.0 66%	20.1 40.2 100 %	18.2 26.2 44%	26.6 33.3 25.2%	18.9 30.2 59.8%	18.9 26.5 40.2%	28.7 38.4 33.8%	23.4 34.0 45.3 %

The table reveals the most significant improvement occurred in the level of vocabulary (88.7%). Intensive exposure to printed words in English impacts positively on students’ awareness of words; their meaning and spelling. Exposure to words supplemented with interesting pictures seemed to be

effective for young learners to remember. This is in line with Artini (2009a) who maintains that every individual has a dynamic quality in learning a new language. The use of appropriate media helps young learners to activate that dynamic quality to learn more effectively.

The least improvement was in writing a short text (39.8%), even though there was some improvement overall. This is not unexpected because writing in English is the most complex skill. For primary school students it is challenging because it involves vocabulary, grammar, sentence formation and other mechanics of writing in a foreign language. The ability to remember and spell words is obviously easier than combining words into grammatically correct sentences. The more difficult the textual task the slower the improvement that can be achieved. This is not unusual since working with complex materials needs a longer time to master. This can be seen in the level of literacy development that occurred as an outcome of RLLE exposure. From the easiest to the most difficult; young learners found it easier to remember words, their meaning and their spelling; followed by sentence level competency and finally capacity for text writing. This finding implies that at the primary school level, English texts and tasks need to be introduced in a carefully ordered sequence of complexity so that learning progress will occur optimally.

It is evident that there are limitations in the research findings reported here. For example, the improvement in young learners' English literacy skills may not just be solely the result of RLLE exposure, particularly since there was a three-month period of time before improvement was assessed. During this period, learners might have gone through a more productive experience of in-class learning that influenced their literacy skills. So the findings offered here should be treated with some caution. Yet it also seems undeniable that intensive and continuous RLLE exposure combined with regular in-class English lessons in a complementary way positively affects young learners' literacy skills in English. Limited formal exposure to English language learning is insufficient for optimal progress. The provision of supplementary material such as RLLE is important. As Scott & Ytreberg (2004) point out, formal learning of a foreign language is not enough. Supplementary materials are needed to optimize learner achievement.

Limited time for formal/regular learning of English in the classroom does not give learners productive opportunities to build their reading and writing skills in the foreign language. In the trial and research on RLLE reported in this article it has been shown that RLLE exposure gives students the opportunity to read and write in their own time. The texts and journal writing activities positively support the formal in-class learning activities which focus mostly on spoken language due to the limited time allocation for the English subject. As stated in the document of the Department of National Education (2009), English in primary schools is supposed to be focused on spoken language, that is, learners are trained to listen, repeat, follow instructions and respond to simple questions or elicitation. It is stated that one of the goals of the English subject in primary schools is to develop communication competence in the form of *language accompanying action*. However, when working on RLLE tasks, students read words, sentences or stories, and copy, write and create sentences of their own, which builds their written literacy skills. In short, the provision of RLLE materials in school premises can fill the gap for young learners to acquire written English skills in a more natural way.

## Conclusion

This research found a positive impact of RLLE on young learners' literacy skills in English. However, as pointed out earlier, there are limits to the interpretation of the findings. The three months of trial of exposure to RLLE may not be the only cause of literacy skills improvement because at the same time learners also gained regular learning in the classroom. However, there are reasons to believe that primary schools students in Bali can benefit from the provision of rich complementary learning materials that build their knowledge of the written language. For the most part they are enthusiastic EFL learners and have been discouraged by the policy reduction of lesson time from 2 x 35 minutes to 1 x 35 minutes in a week. The provision of RLLE in the school seems to offer a promising solution.

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