ENGGING YOUNG LEARNERS IN LITERATURE TO PROMOTE THEIR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND LITERACY

Yosep Bambang Margono Slamet
yosepbbmargono@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways language teachers use in engaging their young learners in literature used in the classroom for promoting their language development and literacy. Research shows that stories have great impacts in children’s early lives and their language development. Listening to stories told or read to them is one major way for children to pick up vocabularies and use them to communicate with other children and adults. However, there are times when teachers fail to engage students in the stories read or told in the classroom. Teachers, therefore, should have creativities to engage their students in the literary works read in the classroom. Ways language teachers can use include the diversity of the selection of the reading materials and pre-reading, during-reading, and after-reading activities. It is in these activities that teachers can implement different ways of reading, depending on the characteristics and responses of their students.

Key words: young language learners, literature, language development, literacy, pre-reading, during reading, and after reading activities

Introduction

The teaching of literature for young learners is very critical for their language and literacy development. In this paper, I use the term “young learners” to refer to preschoolers, kindergarteners, and the first to third graders. These children are in the phase of learning how to read and literature, whether read or told to them in the classroom by their teachers, will have tremendous impacts in their language and literacy development. If teachers use the right books and methods, it will be fun for children to learn how to read and write. It is in this phase that teachers need to have creativities to help their students get the utmost advantage from their learning.

The language and literacy development of children also actually depends on their parents at home because parents are children’s first language teachers. Holdaway (1979) and
Hasson (1991), for example, suggest that parents start reading to their children when the children are still very young. They argue that by listening to their parents, children pick up language. Holdaway works with children in their early school years, finding that children being read to by their parents tend to have better literacy development when they go to school compared to those who have not been read to. Meanwhile, Hasson in particular pays attention to infant and toddlers. She emphasizes the importance of parents in reading to their children to help them learn language. According to her, the earlier the parents read to their children the better. Parents can start reading to their children before they can talk. Showing pictures to their infants and talk about the pictures at the same time are ways for parents to read to them. From the two scholars, we can draw that reading to children is a way for parents (and teachers) to make children love stories. From the Vygotskyan perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), in this case parents and teachers act as mediators for children, not only in their language development and literacy but also into the world of the adults. In short, reading (and telling) stories to children prepare them to be productive individuals in their society (Hunt, 1994).

This paper, however, will not focus on how parents read to their children but on teachers’ strategies or what teachers of young learners should do (and how to do it) to make them love stories and develop their language and literacy in school. Thus, the focus is on how young learners experience formal learning in school. Considering their young age, I suggest that teachers use picture story books to engage their young students’ in stories. To discuss this topic, I outline this paper as follows: After the introduction, I will talk about the selection of the reading materials. In the next section, I discuss the pre-reading activities teachers need to have in delivering the reading materials in the classroom. During-reading activities will be my next discussion, followed by the discussion of after-reading activities and the last part is the final remarks.

The Selection of the Reading Materials

The first strategy teachers should consider in engaging young children in reading works of literature is the selection of reading materials. While a teacher normally knows what kinds of story books appropriate to read in his or her classroom, using one book only is not recommended. Wilhelm, 1997; Tovani, 2000; Bean et al., 1999; Brozo et al., 2007 argue that each individual student may have different tastes and likes so it is advisable that teachers give diversity of reading materials to their students. On the other hand, when young children are
still learning how to read, this idea is perhaps difficult to realize in an EFL classroom like in Indonesia. However, I still do not suggest that a teacher uses only one book to read. He or she needs to have a diversity of reading materials so that he or she can read them alternately, one after the other. This way, the teacher may satisfy the interest of his or her students.

Among the genres of children’s literature, I suggest that a teacher use picturebooks. For the purpose of this paper, what I mean by picturebooks are actually picture story books or books that contain written texts and illustrations that develop a strong story line (see for example Lewis, 2001; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Nodelman, 1988). It is widely known that young children love pictures while they are learning to read. This is one of the major reasons that the use of picturebooks in teaching literature and language is recommended for children. The pictures in a picture story book will attract the interest of children while learning to read. If teachers read the story to students, he or she needs to show the pictures to them.

In addition to the diversity of reading materials, a teacher needs to consider selecting books that relate to students’ age and background knowledge. In an EFL classroom, perhaps it is challenging for teachers of English for young learners in Indonesia to find such books for their students. But if teachers can do so, this will be tremendously important in the success of their teaching because, as research (Wilhelm, 1997; Tovani, 2000; L’Allier & Elish-Piper, 2007) shows, students’ background knowledge is crucial to understand the texts they read. When teachers give their students books they are not familiar with, students may not be interested in listening to their teachers’ reading because the social and cultural contexts may not be familiar to students. Teachers need to look for such socially and culturally familiar books to their students. Finding “the right books” for students, therefore, is the first top priority for teachers in teaching literary texts to their students.

When teachers have the diversity of reading materials for the teaching of language and for introducing literature to children, it does not mean that the job is done. They still need to find ways so that the teaching can be successful—not for the teacher’s sake but primarily for the students’. It should be noted, however, that with the diversity of the reading materials, teachers cannot use them at once but they can only use them one at a time if they read to the whole class. Considering their young age, students need their teacher’s guidance in understanding the meaning of every word and the stories so that they can make meaning of
the stories. It is in this line that pre-reading, during-reading, and after-reading activities are crucial for the success of engaging young children in literature.

Pre-reading Activities

Several reading scholars (L’Allier & Elish-Piper, 2007; O’Brien, 2007; Simon, 2008; Tovani, 2000; Wilhelm, 1997) contend that pre-reading activities are crucial to make the teaching of reading successful. There are many alternatives of pre-reading activities that teachers can use, depending on the level and characteristics of their students. In particular, Tovani (2000) emphasizes that teachers need to ask in the first place what the students expects from the reading material they are going to read together. For example, teachers need to show the book to students and tell them a little bit what it is about. In the next step, teachers can ask their students what they expect from the book. This will be interesting because teachers are able to know immediately what every student needs. Some of them may want to know what happens to the main characters, some may need to enjoy the pictures, and the rest may want to learn new vocabularies. Knowing the various needs of their students, teachers will be able to design an appropriate way to teach them. In addition to knowing their students’ needs, pre-reading activities is to prepare students to enter the story world (Wilhelm, 1997) which may completely different from students’ real world. If this is the case, it is really important for teachers to prepare their students before reading together. According to Wilhelm, if students fail to enter the story world, they will fail in reading the text because they cannot create meaning from the texts.

Another pre-reading activities teachers can do is to show the book to students. Teachers can cover the title and ask students to guess what the title is. This way, teachers are able to trigger the curiosity of the students. Instead of having passive students, this activity will make teachers have a lively class. Whether the class can guess the title of the book or not, it does not really matter because what matters more, as I have stated, is to attract students to participate in the activity or to arouse their curiosity. In the next step, when the whole class already knows the title of the book, teachers can ask students what the word or phrase means. By asking this question, definitely teachers promote students’ language development and literacy. In addition, teachers can also ask students about what kind of book they are going to read. The idea of these activities is to get all students involved so that the teaching of reading a literary text is successful. Is there any time limit concerning pre-reading activities? Every
teacher knows well how much he or she should spend the time for this. What teachers need to have in mind is that the time should be enough to conduct pre-reading, during-reading, and after-reading activities.

During-reading Activities

Like pre-reading activities, creative teachers will find ways to make the reading interesting. When dealing with young learners, it is not recommended that teachers just read a story from the beginning to the end without stopping. If they do it this way it means that they do not try to get students involved. It is very important that during reading, teachers stay connected to their students. Teachers should not forget that the reading lesson is for their students, not for themselves. Without the involvement of their students, the reading lesson fails. During-reading activities should be able to engage students in reading the book. O’Brien et al. (2007) and Wilhelm (1997) suggest that during-reading activities is to heighten students’ motivation to participate in the reading and understanding of the story. Thus, reading the book without stopping is not recommended. Instead of just reading the story from the beginning to the end, teachers can act as story tellers. Facial expression, intonation, emphasis, and other supra-segmental features of language may be used to attract students’ attention if one way traffic is the method that teachers want to use in reading the book (teachers read the story and children listen to them).

On the other hand, interactive reading seems to be a better idea, in the sense that during reading, teachers also involve their students. For example, the teacher can ask some students to act as characters in the story. This is called dramatization of the story. This activity will make students take full participation during the reading activities. When students have problems understanding the meaning of words used in the story, teachers should not tell them in the first place the meaning of those words but ask them to guess. By looking at the pictures (when teachers and students are reading a picture story book), it is expected that students will be able to guess the meaning of some words by looking at the pictures. If they can guess the meaning of the words or at least predict the meaning of the words, then students will have higher motivation and engagement in reading. However, if those words are challenging for them, then teachers can jump in to explain the meaning of those words so that students have better understanding of the story.
Thus, dramatization of the story is an important during-reading activity in understanding the stories read together in the classroom (O’Brien et al., 2007 and Wilhelm, 1997). They suggest that this activity is able to help students enter the story world and understand the stories better. By dramatizing the story, students will try to do their best to say and/or do what the characters say and/or do. One particular advantage of this activity is that even resistive students (students who are actually able to read but do not want to) will willingly participate in it. I suggest that in doing this activity, teachers give equal opportunities to every student, not only to certain students so that everybody feels appreciated. Some of us may think that this activity is suitable only for older students but I suggest that we do not underestimate young children’s interest and ability. With the right guidance they can possibly amaze us.

Another during-reading activity that teachers can do is to ask students to draw pictures from the story. Even if they read picture story books, teachers can still ask students to draw their own pictures of the story. We need to remember that for children drawing is a way to express their feelings and opinions. Even though they already see the pictures from the book they are reading, many children in a classroom still may have their own versions of pictures about the characters or places or anything that interest them. In relation to this, I want to share with all of language teachers for young learners what my youngest son did when he was between 4 and 10 years old. Almost every day he drew pictures and he always tried to write something about them. I am grateful that my wife documented all his drawings and now I learn that his pictures tell stories of our life. When he was four, my son still had limited vocabularies to express his feelings and thoughts and thus pictures are a means for him to express himself. At the time he was still in the process of learning Indonesian and Javanese languages but then we moved to the United States and he had to learn the English language. As a father and language teacher, I learn a lot from what my son did—how important pictures are for young children. Therefore, if it is possible for language teachers for young learners to ask their students to draw pictures out of the book they are reading in the classroom, this will have tremendous impacts on children’s language development.

Meanwhile, Good Reads: Reading Guide (n.d.) offers a during-reading activity such as “working with the book.” At this point, teachers ask student to pay attention in detail to the plot, characters, and setting of the story. Whether this activity works well, it is the teachers
who know exactly about it. I suggest that this activity is not recommended for preschoolers and kindergarteners. It is better for them to enjoy the story or do the other activities as I have discussed. In principle, reading literary texts should be enjoyable, not monotonous. When a method of reading fails to attract students’ interest, we need to use another method.

After-reading Activities

The last thing to do for teachers when reading books with their students in the classroom is conducting after-reading activities. Retelling the story is one alternative. Teachers can spend some time to ask students to do this. Every student may have different versions of the story because they have different perspectives, background knowledge, and focus during the reading. Consequently, the way students connect to the story is also different. Retelling can be an indication of how much students understand the story. Usually those who are very enthusiastic in retelling the story understand it well (or those who understand the story well will be very enthusiastic in retelling the story). If all students are very enthusiastic, teachers should be feeling happy.

L’Allier and Elish-Piper (2007) offer alpha boxes for an after-reading activity. Teachers can provide boxes in which each box contains an alphabet. Having the alpha boxes, students can write what they remember from the reading, whether it is about the characters, plot, setting, and other ideas that students want to write. For young learners, teachers should not ask them to write complicated things but simple ones, such as names of the characters, whether they are good or bad, their prominent features, etc. The more students write the more they remember from the reading. What if they do not write anything in the boxes? Perhaps they are not interested in the story, or perhaps the story is still too difficult for them. The alpha boxes, then, can be a means for teachers’ evaluation.

Another important after-reading activity is to ask students to make connections. L’Allier and Elish-Piper (2007), Tovani (2000), and Wilhelm (1997) state that students need to make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections in order to make meaning of the story they read. The first two activities should not be understood as complex activities. Even for young learners, I suggest that teachers do these two in the classroom. For text-to-self connection, for example, teachers can first ask students whether they like the story or not. If they do, the next question is why. In answering this simple question, it is expected that students will tell the connection between the story and their own lives. Answers like ‘the
main character is like me’; or ‘my brother is like the main character’; or maybe ‘my father is like the main character’s father’, etc. are a strong indication that the story is related to students’ lives. In asking students to make text-to-text connection, teachers can recall some of the books that they have read with their students. To help them, teachers can retell the stories shortly and mention some of the characters. If students remember them then we know that they are engaged in the stories read together in the classroom and it will not be difficult for them to relate the previous books they have read with the one they are reading. If teachers think that making text-to-world connections are still very challenging to young learners, then teachers can skip this activity because usually this activity is for older readers.

Final remarks
What I propose in this paper is only an example of what teachers of literature can do to engage their young learners to read literary works, understand them, and make meaning of them. Because every class is different, different teachers may find different other ways to make the teaching of literature successful. We should not forget, however, that reading literary works in the classroom is not the only goal. The other goal is to promote students’ language development and literacy. When both parents at home and teachers read to young children, they create zones of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) to help children develop from non-readers to independent readers. Picturebooks sharing between parents and children or teachers and children is one important way to introduce concepts of print to children because children associate pictures with the print during the reading (Fletcher & Reese, 2005). Repeated readings help to develop awareness of the concept of print and reading-like behavior (Holdaway, 1979). Thus, parents and teachers have critical roles in children’s language development and literacy. In terms of acquiring new vocabularies, Mol et al. (2008:8) contend that “books cannot be a source for acquiring new vocabularies unless children get intensive help and support from adults.” If we can engage children to read literature, we put them on the right literacy track.

References


