Children Books As A Means to Bridge Local Culture and Language Learning: A Project Report

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ABSTRACT

Children books have always been a great way to stimulate children's learning process, especially learning a foreign language. Through books, young learners are exposed to words and culture of the language itself. However, it is often difficult to explain the concept of foreign culture to these kids especially if the parents/teachers themselves are not familiar with it. Responding to the problem, during the Semester Antara, May - July 2011, the author made Audio Visual Aids Workshops for students of the English Department of Satya Wacana Christian University. In these workshops students learnt how to make children books and made them as a final project. There were four groups who made children books. These books tell stories from local culture, such as the origin of Javanese alphabet (aksara Jawa), in English. These books are aimed as a means to promote English language learning through the culture that is more common to parents/teachers. This paper will elaborate on the steps students took till the final result they created, and the benefits of this activity.

Key words: culture, AVA, children book

INTRODUCTION

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots."

-- Marcus Garvey

Walking down the alley of children book section in any local book stores, I often find hundreds of English children books. Many of them are very well known such as Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, Beauty and the Beast, etc. Those books tell foreign stories from foreign cultures. Since they appear in various attracting looks, parents who would like to expose their children to English will be easily captivated and buy them. Enriched with colorful pictures, children usually love reading them. As a result, children are more exposed to those cultures which they are not familiar with. Ironically, often because of too much exposure to foreign sources, these kids become unaware of stories from Indonesia, their own country. Consequently, Indonesian culture is fading.

Responding to the problem, during the Semester Antara, May - July 2011, the author made Audio Visual Aids (AVA) Workshops for students of the English Department of Satya Wacana Christian University.

Twenty four students from 2006 – 2010 academic years participated in these workshops. All students must attend thirteen meetings which were divided into two sections: theory and producing.
In the first five meetings, students learnt the theory of producing AVA for teaching and learning process which included short films, animations, children books and comics. Students, worked in groups, were given time to consult with the instructor about their final projects. Students must create one or two AVAs for this assignment. Four groups chose to make children books, one group made comic and stop motion pictures, and the last group produced a short film. Specifically for children books, the stories are taken from Indonesian folktales which are told in English.

This paper serves as a report of the workshops, specifically for the children books. Overall, it will discuss the steps students took till the final result they created and the benefits of producing English children book using local contents.

**AUDIO VISUAL AID AND LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Audio visual aid is any device used to help in the communication of an idea (AUDIOVISUAL AIDS). According to Farid Khan (Khan, 2009), AVA helps increasing the effectiveness of teaching, holding the attention span of the learner for the duration of instruction, and making learning experiences last longer. Thus, having an effective and efficient AVA for teaching is very essential. Specifically in teaching a foreign/second language, in this case English, AVA will be a great deal of help especially in teaching abstract ideas such as tenses.

According to Singhal second language acquisition and learning is learning and acquisition of a second language once the mother tongue acquisition is established (Singhal, 2011). In Indonesia, especially in big cities, where English has started to become the second language, many people are more aware and encourage the use of English especially in education. Bilingual schools and national plus schools use English as a medium of instruction.

**LOCAL CULTURE**

As English becomes the global language, it influences a lot of aspects in Indonesia such as social and economy. Considering its significant effects, numerous educational institutions present English as a required language in their teaching learning process. As a result, bilingual schools mushroom everywhere.

However, in line with David Crystal’s point (Crystal, 2003) learning certain language especially the language which is considered as the global language may also endanger the existence of local language. In this case, learning English has jeopardized the existence of Bahasa Indonesia in general and local languages, such as Javanese, Sundanese, Timorese, etc. in particular. Children who are exposed too much to English may fall into tendency of not being able to speak Bahasa Indonesia or other local languages. To make it even worse, some parents who are proud to see their children fluent in English often do not really care if their children cannot communicate in Bahasa Indonesia or other local languages. As a result, these languages are fading. Since language is a part of culture (Izadpanah, 2011), the disappearing of certain language also means the extinction of certain culture.

**DISCUSSION**

Starting May 24th to July 5th 2011, the author held audio visual aids workshops intended for English Department students. Not only to fill in their spare time with useful activities, these workshops also functioned as an enrichment for students so that they have the ability to produce
audio visual aids to support their teaching practicum. For the first five meetings, students were equipped with theories on how to produce AVA and some basic exercises on how to use certain programs to support the AVA. These included theories of AVA, how to make and edit short film using Ulead Video Studio, cartoons or simple animation using Corel RAVE, and comics/children books using Photoshop.

In the sixth meeting, students had to consult with their instructor about what kind of AVA that they are going to make. Four groups then decided to make children books. Upon their decision in making those books, the instructor strongly suggested them to use Indonesian folk tales. Preserving the local culture was not the only reason behind this suggestion. There are prospective target readers out there who would love to read Indonesian folk tales in English. It is only a matter of finding a way to publish these folk tales so that the target readers may get access to them.

The four groups chose these stories: Batik Plumpungan (the origin of Batik designs from Salatiga), the legend of Aji Saka, the legend of Cianjur, and Timun Mas.

After consultation, students then worked outside the class. They started with hand-drawing pictures for the books. Once they finished drawing, they showed the pictures in the class to get comments or suggestions from peers. They would later then make revisions or adjustments based on the class comments and suggestions. Finished with the revision, students would proceed to the scanning stage. All the sketches that they have made were scanned and turned into JPEG files. These files were to be edited using Photoshop. Students would outline, color and give effects to the sketches to make the drawing more interesting.

When they had this stage finished, students would come to class and present the results. Peers then gave comments and suggestions again, which later became the source of revisions and adjustments for their drawing.

Completed the drawings, students then proceeded to adding dialogues. They had to submit the dialogues in form of word documents to the instructor for proof-reading. Once the lines were proof-read, students then inserted them in the drawings.

The final results with complete dialogues were then to be presented again in front of the class to get comments and suggestions. When students finished with this stage, they would have the files printed and bundled to be books. The final projects then for the last time were to be shown to class.

ADVANTAGES

Despite the complicated back and forth revisions and comments steps students have to face when they made these projects, there are some advantages that students gain through this process.

Promoting/preserving the local culture
Since the sources of the story books are folktales, automatically students involved in the making have participated in preserving their local culture. By writing the children books, the students become more aware of their surroundings and the cultural wealth that they have. If the books are published, more people would get a chance to read them. More people read the stories mean more people become aware of their folktales. The awareness would later hinder the extinction of the culture.
Language learning for participants
In the process of making the children books, students have to decide what grammar that they would use in their books later on. They have to select appropriate tenses or structures that would be best narrating their stories. In order to decide the tenses, students have to understand the pattern themselves. They learn how to apply the structure correctly in their final products. By doing this, they have actually learned the language by applying/doing it. And when they are learning it that way, they would likely to understand the language better. Students would learn from their mistakes especially when they have to go on the revision steps over and over again.

Language learning for target readers
The target readers for these books are children of age 3 – 12. As mentioned by Lenneberg (Lenneberg, 1967), these ages are critical period for language to develop completely. Through the children books made by the students joining these workshops, it is hoped that the target readers may learn English as well as the culture. Children may learn the language through the stories they read. The more they read, the more they are exposed to English. Furthermore, they also learn the culture of Indonesia through the stories. Thus, they are also exposed to Indonesian culture since they are in the early age. It is hoped that when they are introduced to the culture as soon as possible, these children may become more aware of their cultural wealth and preserve it.

Encouraging students’ active participation/production
Students often feel their study in schools is useless because they often forget what they have learned. Furthermore, not all skills and knowledge that they have gained may be useful for their jobs in the future. This kind of feeling frequently leads them to boredom and lack of motivation. As a result they do not study well because there is no challenge for them.

In order to answer this problem, practical activities can help. These audio visual aids workshops are the example. Through these classes, students do not only learn the skills and knowledge on how to make a children book, but they also produce the book. Students can really see the result of their hard work. The final product may boost students’ confidence and encourage them to make books again. These books are to be sent to publishers. If they get accepted and published, students who make them will be proud. A great achievement for students, to have their books published and their names are there as the authors. This accomplishment would be a great item to be listed in their CV later on.

Promoting the department
Not only would the students get the benefits from producing the children books, the department (the school) also gets the advantages from this activity. The department may get the advantages in two ways:

a. The department as a publisher
   If the children books are not to be sent to any commercial publishers, the department may act as the publisher. The department may print and publish the books itself, or have a third party that would print and/or distribute the books while the department only in charge of funding it. Either one would be a great way of establishing the department’s own publishing company. The department press may function not only as the place to publish the children books that its students produce, but also a medium of publishing for its faculty members as well. Having a printing press for a department (school) is a great way of promoting itself to
public. It would be a pride of own to have an established press like Oxford University press or Cambridge University Press.

b. The department as a mentioned institution

This particular scheme will work if the department sends the books to the publisher and has its name written in the books as the institution who supervises the students who write them. Either scheme selected will be a great tool of promotion for the department. Exposing the facts to public that the department is not only a place for studying, but it is also capable to channel its students to be productive. Furthermore, those schemes mentioned above are also a money generating tool both for the institution and students who write the books.

CONCLUSION

Learning is a way to improve someone’s skills and knowledge. Learning can be serious, but it can also be fun. Learning should not only a matter of focusing on what the learners can absorb, but it may also be a way of making the learners produce what they can and even contribute to the society.

As elaborated above, Indonesian culture is fading. One of the factors that cause it is because of the globalization of English. More and more Indonesians speak and are exposed to English that they become unaware of their own culture. Many kids nowadays do not even know how to speak their local languages. As a result, these languages and cultures are disappearing. Something has to be done to solve the problem. Otherwise, Indonesia will remain a country that forgets its heritage and roots.

Making English children books which contain Indonesian folktales may become one of the answers to preserve Indonesian culture without ignoring the need of global language learning. Besides gaining skills and knowledge on how to make children books, students who participate in this project may also stimulate their creativity and boost their self confidence. This project may prompt their desire to produce more and better books. Their self confidence level and pride are also raised, especially if their books get successfully published. The school/department also gets the advantages from this project. Besides performing as a promotion tool for the institution, this project may also be a money generating instrument especially if the school/department performs as the publisher.

REFERENCES


