ASSESSING YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS’ (YLLS) READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH PICTURE (A CASE STUDY AT CHILDREN ENGLISH COURSE IN BANDUNG)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of picture in assessing young language learners’ (YLLs) reading comprehension. Most things that involve children are ‘special’ and language assessment is no exception. The need for assessment of the language ability is growth in need for the ability itself, for work, study, pleasure or even survival. One of procedures for YLLs assessment should be appealing to the age group, interesting and captivating, preferable with elements of game and fun. Picture is one of visual mental image in response to a text that is fun and enjoyable activity for children. This case study involved nine six-grade students as the participants. Three research instruments; observation, interview, and document analysis were used in this study. The results of the study show that picture was one of preferable activity to assess YLLs’ ability in reading. It can be concluded that, picture takes account of the principles and practice of language testing and assessment that can be implemented in assessing YLLs.

Keywords: assessing YLLs, poetry as teaching material, reading comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

Special demands are placed on the assessment of Young language learners’ (YLLs) language ability. Young language learners (YLLs) are defined here as being school pupils up to around 13 years old, thus incorporating the primary school in Indonesia context. They have usually met internal testing in the school, and even some external testing, may be familiar to them. The need for interesting and motivating activity, which
ought of course to be present at all stages, is therefore particularly important for YLLs, in fact, in the absence of exam pressure, be decisive in determining what goes on in the YLL classroom. Finding a way of assessment which puts the characteristics of the YLL in focus has to offer (Hasselgreen, (2005).

Teaching English at primary school is still controversial issues in Indonesia for several reasons (Alwasilah, 2000; 2001; Abdul-Hamid, 2002). One of them is that the English literacy is very complex to accomplish for Young language learners (YLLs) (Setiasih, 2014). However, the research was conducted at an English course in which English was fully used as a means of instruction. In this case study poetry was used as material in teaching. There are three educational benefits of using poetry in TEYL in the EFL settings; a) providing readers with a different viewpoint toward language use by going beyond the known usages and rules of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary; b) triggering unmotivated readers owning to being so open to explorations and different interpretations; c) evoking feelings and thoughts in heart and mind (Sarac, 2003). Thus, the use of poetry as the learning material helps learners to make connection in the field of their own experiences. Poetry exposes young learners to meaningful contexts and communicative atmosphere.

The poetry was selected under the teacher’s guideline by covering three points. First, the topic should be interesting to YLLs. To cover this point, the survey to measure YLLs’ knowledge of poetry and their attitude toward it were conducted by the teacher. The interesting topic would be engaging students in learning. Second, the topic should be familiar. It means that the chosen topic should relate to nature of YLLs or resemble their experiences. Third, the topic should be understandable to them. The teacher avoided using specific cultural viewpoint that may be difficult for YLLs.

Teaching English through Poetry cannot be separated from reading activities that require comprehension of the reading texts. In comprehending a text, the reader actively creates meaning and brings background of knowledge about the topic into the text, intentions, expectations and purpose of reading, values and beliefs that already has in mind (Smith, 2012; Fina et al, 1991 as cited in Mustafa, 1994, p. 53). Therefore, the YLL constructs the meaning of the text toward private feeling and experience with potential reader intention both personal as well
as social. It is called as literary experience whereby the reader plays an active role in making sense of literary work.

Literary experience is a transaction between the reader and the text in a particular context (Smith, 1988; Rossenblatt, 1989; Spiegel, 1998; Clifford, 1991). In this term, the reader plays a vital role in the meaning making process. This means that students put as the center of concern and make their concern the core of instruction in teaching. There are some general guidelines for instruction to support the literary experience (Langer, 1994, p. 207). First, use class meetings as a time for YLLs to explore possibilities and develop understanding of already acquired meaning. Second, begin with YLLs initial impressions to validate their own attempts to understand the meaning. Third, help to scaffold their ideas and guide them in ways of to discuss and think. Fourth, ask questions that extend YLLs’ knowledge as part of the process of understanding literature. Fifth, encourage YLLs to develop their own interpretations in ways to listen and speak to one another. The most important thing in literary experience is the teacher as well as YLLs need to be open to possible meanings. In literary experience, no preconceived ends or final inviolable interpretations are received.

In the classroom context, there are two frameworks of literary experience; first, beginning the literary experience. The second, continuing the literary experience. In beginning the literary experience, the teacher creates a context to evoke broad personal, history, or conceptual connections and to invite YLLs’ literary experience, and provides YLLs with opportunities to engage in varied activities with thought-provoking literature. In continuing the literary experience, the teacher keeps YLLs’ thought at the center of concern, help them to develop their interpretations and analyzing their understandings, the text, and their experiences. Thus, literary experience is the way in which from the moment YLLs begin reading, using their understanding to reflect on their own lives, on the lives of others and condition in general.

We need to consider how we are going to exploit the poetry. It may simply be for fun and motivation, for social enjoyment within the classroom. That is a worthy purpose. A very exploitable poetry may be one that is versatile, that can even be adapted and changed by substituting words and extending ideas. Teaching materials selection is important in teaching
poetry. In the EFL context, a relationship of respect between the teacher and YLL plays a very important role, as Cummins notes:

“Techniques and strategies will be effective only when teachers and students forge a relationship of respect and affirmation; when students feel that they are welcomed into the learning community of the classroom and supported in the immense challenges they face in catching up academically; and when the students feel that their teachers believe in them and expect them to succeed in school and in life (1996, p. 74).”

The characteristics of YLLs, and the implications of these for the assessment of their language ability are discussed widely in the ‘young learner’ literature (Halliwell: 1992, Vale and Feunteun: 1995, and Cameron: 2001). On the basis of this discussion, there appears to be consensus that assessment procedures for YLLs should satisfy some demands. One of them is the tasks should be appealing to the age group, interesting and captivating, preferably with elements of game and fun.

Creating visual mental images in response to a text is another important part of the literary experience. These mental images of characters, places, actions are intimately related to readers’ emotional experience with text and their understanding of text. Students may use visual images or icons to explore and extend their responses (Beach, 1993, p. 62). Connecting past experience or previous reading to a current text is another process of engagement. In recalling related past experiences, the more readers elaborate on those experiences, the more they can use those experiences to interpret stories. Readers may assess or judge the quality of one’s experience with a text. Readers bring certain expectations to what they hope to gain from their experience with a text.

Visualization or imagery is a useful way of going beyond the text, because visualizing induces the reader to draw on prior knowledge and thus ground ideas discussed in the text (Bell & Lindamood, 1991). Also, visual memory is sometimes better than verbal memory (e.g., Shepard, 1967). Visualization is a particularly useful strategy for younger readers and for narrative texts whereupon images of familiar situations can easily be evoked. According to Puett Miller (2004), visualization is a proven strategy used to improve reading comprehension. Research in the area of imagery has been promising: Participants who are asked to visualize text contents
remembered and comprehended more than control students (Center, Freeman, Robertson, & Outhred, 1999; McCallum & Moore, 1999; Oakhill & Patel, 1991).

In brief, the purpose of the study is to describe how the teacher assesses YLLs’ reading comprehension through picture. In this context, teaching English through poetry is a part of reading activities that require comprehension of the reading texts. In comprehending a text, students actively create meaning and visualize mental images in response to a text. Students’ visualize mental images through picture drawing that illustrates what the poetry is about.

**METHOD**

The data for this research were analyzed qualitatively. Analyzing data in a qualitative study involves synthesizing the information the research obtains from various sources such as observations, interviews and document analysis into coherent description of what he or she has observed or discovered (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993, p. 383). The participants of this study were one English teacher and nine six-grade students. The nine students were five boys and four girls whose ages ranged from 11 to 12 years old. This study employed multiple data gatherings over an eight-meeting period. The teacher met her class two times a week. The methods used in this study were classroom observations, teacher interview, and document analysis.

Classroom observations were attended to identify how the teacher assessed students’ reading through picture. The researcher took a role as non-participant observer since she was not involved physically and psychologically in the interaction in the classroom (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The observations were conducted two times in a week. The detail of classroom activities were videotaped and subsequently transcribed. Interview was employed to gain in-depth information of the program. In this study, poetry was used as the primary learning material in teaching English. The focus was to teach English, not to teach literature as the objective of teaching. Document analysis was used in order to verify the data from observation and interview. The data were documents of teaching materials and students’ work. Poetry as teaching materials was utilized to investigate the focus of the study.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stages in Teaching Poetry

The results show that there were three stages in teaching poetry. They were the introductory stage, the exploration stage, and the evaluation stage. The stages were displayed in the following figure.

In the introductory stage, teacher directly modeled the thought processes involved in visualizing poetry. The teacher read a short poetry and describe the images that saw in her mind. There were some activities in this stage, such as: introducing the topic to discuss by playing video player or questioning technique, translating uncommon words, pronouncing the words accurately and knowing the author. The next stage was the exploration stage. In this stage, different short poetry was read for YLLs to visualize. The teacher chose something that was descriptive so they could easily create vivid images in their mind. She also explained to YLLs that when they visualized, it was important to use their background knowledge and words in the text (poetry) to help them imagine a picture in their mind. It was in line with Lazar (1999) point of view that literature is beneficial to encourage students to draw on their own personal experiences, feelings and opinions. In the last stage (evaluation stage), students should share their images with a partner. After forming an image, YLLs were asked to illustrate/draw, share and discuss their picture. They should pair up with a
partner, and shared what they have visualized. YLLs allowed to choose their own subjects to describe to each other.

**Drawing Poetry Illustration**

Data from document indicated that drawing poetry illustration encouraged YLLs’ motivation to read by relating the themes and topics in a literary text to their experience. Ownership was important in young learners’ language development to personalize the target language. The data from document confirm related theory. The activity was drawing an appropriate illustration of a poetry entitled ‘Mary’s Lamb’. There were five students attending the class. Each of them should draw the illustration of the poem. Students’ work can be seen below:

Picture 1. Shafa’s work

This picture was drawn by a student who is categorized into average achiever. His name is Shafa. Shafa’s work depicts his experience in real-life situation. Even though, he had drawn an inappropriate setting, his illustration was related to the poetry in one aspect. It was the characters in the poetry. There were two characters, Marry (a girl) and a lamb. He had drawn the most important character in the poem (lamb). Although it was impossible to know exactly what was going on in his mind, the example above indicates that Shafa developed his individual response to the poetry. From the picture, it can be seen that there were two portals. One portal described as the portal to go home and the other portal to go to school.
These two portals were not explained in the poetry. As a game lover, Shafa responded to the poem as he was playing in the game. He tried to associate the setting of the poem based on his imagination. Visual representation is an authentic and purposeful ways to assess and evaluate personal expressive, critical, and aesthetic qualities. It made visual representation so powerful and essential (Shephard, 1993, Kohn, 2001 as cited in Bustle, 2004 see also Vincent, 2001).

Picture 2. Ilham’s work

Ilham’s work indicates how the YLL shaped his world. Mary was a girl’s name but Ilham drew a boy’s character in the picture. He might have drawn the picture based on his previous experience. Generally, the lamb has connection with shepherd. He might be connected among lamb, boy and shepherd. In Indonesian context, someone who guards the lamb is shepherd and usually it is male. He might drawn the setting not as described in the poem but it was more about his imagination. The character looked like shepherd who guarded the lamb. It can be seen from a whip in the character’s hand. It described the reader’s role when interpreting the text. It was essential that teacher educate students about modes of representations that continue to shape their worlds. “To do so, educators must first embrace visual representation as a valued tool for understanding not as an accessory, frill (Shephard, 1993; Kohn, 2001 as cited in Bustle, 2004; Vincent, 2001).
The picture above reveals that visual representation was a form of internalizing the poetry. In the picture, there were a boy and a lamb. As mentioned previously, the main character in ‘Marry’s Lamb’ was a girl. The picture was represented the poem in two aspects, the main character (lamb) and the setting (school) of the poem. Gilba replaced the main character (Mary) as a boy. He tried to imagine himself as the one of the character in the poetry. Visual representations were both a process for and representation of comprehending of the text. The picture represented the actual object in the poetry such as school building and lamb except the illustration of the boy near to the lamb and the flag. However, meaning was determined as the result of transaction. The picture was constructed independently by the readers. Thus, the boy and flag in the picture were the result of transaction among Gilba’s experience, his imagination and the text.

Picture 4 indicates, holistically, the reader successfully understood the poetry. Dilahwas the high achiever among the students. She had a broader context in comprehending the poetry. The picture was the best illustration of the poetry entitled “Mary’s Lamb”. She might link her previous knowledge and the poetry. Therefore, the illustration shows her comprehension of the poem. There was a school building and some students as the background of the picture. Thus, illustration was a reflective and creative process.
This was one of procedures for YLLs assessment should be appealing to the age group, interesting and captivating, preferable with elements of game and fun (Hasselgreen, 2005). The teacher used visual tools to evaluate students’ understanding of poetry. Her evaluation of learning lied with textual expressions of understanding as she sought to learn whether student had made connection between their visual exploration and their understanding of the text.

Tiara’s work (Picture 5) reveals that the role of reader response to the text was a necessary tool to confirm understanding of the text. Having students work on visual representations to evaluate students’ understanding of the text was one of teacher commitment in this study. It gave her an opportunity to talk to her students, assess their progress, and evaluate effort while they work. The interaction with her students had an impact on their overall evaluation of students’ comprehension of the text. Visual representations worked as scaffolding to help students better understand the content. Language-related processes served as scaffolding to help students better understand the text (Rossenblatt, 1994). Although the teacher tended to focus on the assessment of content area learning, she did consider visual qualities in their evaluations. By looking at completion, effort, and selection of images, she also considered how well the selection of images symbolizes the topic under study. The teacher cited effort as an important consideration in assessment and evaluation.
Visual representation was an authentic and purposeful ways to assess and evaluate personal expressive, critical, and aesthetic qualities. It made visual representation so powerful and essential (Kohn, 2001 as cited in Bustle, 2004). Thus, illustration was a reflective and creative process.

CONCLUSION

The significant finding of this study is that picture was a preferable activity to assess YLLs’ ability in reading. Poetry as visual tools was used to evaluate students’ reading comprehension in exploring poetry. It takes account of the principles and practice of language testing and assessment that can be implemented in assessing YLLs. Connecting past experience or previous reading to a current text is another process of engagement. In recalling related past experiences on the experiences, they use it to interpret a text. In brief, the findings of this study are expected to the English teaching for YLLs and English literacy teaching in Indonesian context.

REFERENCES


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**APPENDIX**

**Mary’s Lamb**
Sarah Josepha Hale (1788-1879)

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow;
And everywhere that Mary went,
The lamb was sure to go.

It followed her to school one day
Which was against the rule;
I made the children laugh and play,
To see a lamb at school.

And so the teacher turned him out,
But still he lingered near,
And waited patiently about,
Till Mary did appear.

And then he ran to her and laid,
His head upon her arm,
As if he said, ‘I’m not afraid –
You shield me from all harm.’

‘What makes the lamb love Mary so?’
The little children cry;
‘O Mary loves the lamb, you know,’
The teacher did reply.

‘And you each gentle animal,
In confidence may bind,
And make it follow at your call,
If you are always kind.
(Source: MotherGooseCaboose.com}