

USING CHILDREN SHORT STORIES TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION

Merli Puji Handayani*
dongwon.pyong@gmail.com

*Merli graduated in 25 June 2013 from English Education Study Program of Indonesia University of Education

Abstract: The study informs the use of children short stories in teaching reading comprehension in one of junior high schools in Bandung. Due to their length, vocabulary, and storyline, children short stories were selected for the purpose to increase students' motivation to read. A classroom action research was conducted in this study in form of three cycles of treatment. The data were collected through various sources: observation sheet, reading test, questionnaire, and interview. The data then were analyzed through triangulation method and reported in qualitative descriptive analysis. The findings revealed despite some limitations, the use of children short stories helped the students to improve their reading comprehension. The result of reading test showed a slightly improvement on the students' average score from 61.09 in diagnostic test increased to 76.28 in Cycle 3 therapeutic test. The result of observation implied that the employment of reading strategies and the characteristic of children short stories gave influences to the improvement of students' reading comprehension. In addition, the results from questionnaire and interview indicated that students were aware of having progress in terms of vocabulary and comprehending the text generally. It is thus recommended for further studies to minimize the challenge found in this study and to vary kinds of children short stories used.

Keywords: *A model of teaching, children short stories, reading comprehension, EFL students*

Introduction

Reading in a foreign language, in this case English, is considered to be difficult for most Indonesian students. This is supported by numerous research that shows the ability of Indonesian students in reading English texts was very low (Syatriana, 2010:28). Furthermore, an observation conducted by the researcher during her teaching practicum in a junior high school showed that the students' capability in comprehending English texts was poor.

The process of comprehension becomes difficult for EFL learners (Hayashi, 1999:125). Thus, Hayashi (1999) recommended teachers select texts that

stimulate students to read so that the difficulties of grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension can be overcome. Yet, this raises a question on how to make the students interested in reading English text and how the teacher selects the reading material that encourages the students to read.

Therefore, reading children short stories can be a good learning material since it is considered to be adequate for the learners from all levels (from the beginner to the advanced learners) (Collie & Slater, 1991). It is expected that the students will follow the storyline easier. Moreover, the story is expected to make the students interested in reading it. Related to reading and appreciating literature, Palardy (1997:67) stated that students “will have the opportunity to develop insights and understandings of the cultures and people of the world; to develop their imagery and visualization abilities; and to gain new perspectives by testing their ideas with those found in books.”

Based on the explanation above, the research aims to investigate how the use of children short stories can help students improve their reading comprehension and what the students' responses are toward the use of children short stories in teaching reading. In so doing, the research questions are:

1. How can reading children short stories improve students' reading comprehension?
2. What are students' responses toward the use of children short stories in teaching reading?

Theoretical Foundation

The study has been given shape by the theories of reading comprehension and the use of literature in English language teaching, especially children short stories.

- **Reading Comprehension**

Most of reading process can be seen mostly as a cognitive activity (Weir and Urquhart, 1998; cited in Wallace, 2001). Besides, it gives greater prominence to the students' affective in engaging themselves into the text. Regarding the

cognitive process and students' engagement to the text, the terms of reading comprehension become a vital component in reading process

Reading comprehension can be described as a complex process which needs reader's active thinking in constructing meaning to get deep understanding to the concepts and information displayed from the text (Blanton et al., 2007; Neufeld 2006; Rapp et al., 2007 cited in Westwood, 2008:31). To be able to comprehend, the reader initially relates the prior knowledge that they have with the text which is referred as schema (plural schemata) (Harmer, 2001). Besides using prior knowledge, they should have good word recognition skills and implement some reading strategies such as identifying main ideas, making connections, questioning, inferring, and predicting (Moreillon, 2007). It is in line with Pressley&Wharton-McDonald (1997, cited in Rice, 2009:3) who asserted that a good reader is considered to be actively engage with the text and use comprehension strategies

It can be concluded that to comprehend a text successfully, there are various factors that contribute into the process which are L2 language knowledge and reading strategies that the readers applied through reading the text. The use o

- The Use of Children Short Stories

The use of literature in language classes is not a new phenomenon since it was used in 19th century when Grammar Translation Method was still mostly used. Literature was one of material that students have to translate into their native language. However, since Structuralism approach began to dominate during the 1960s to the end of 1970s, literature was no longer used (Pardede, 2011). Even when Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method, Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia, the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, the Natural Approach, and Communicative Approach magnificently dominated ESL/EFL teaching, literature was still ignored.

Finally, since 1980s literature regained its way back to EFL teaching. It is used as authentic material in language class, not as a source for translation. Literature turns out to be a context for EFL learners as Littlewood (2000: 179)

mentioned that literature “enables students to understand the language better by providing the students with real world experiences, relationships between society and people where the target language is spoken, even if they are fictions.”

Children short stories were selected among various kinds of literary genre because of the length of the story and readability for foreign language learners especially for low-intermediate level of students. Collin and Slater (1991:196) explained that short stories can be used for EFL learners because 1) the length of the story is appropriate for one or two class session, 2) it is not complicated for the students, 3) it has variety of choices, and 4) it can be used for all levels (from beginner to advance) and for all ages (young learners to adults). By selecting stories that appropriate for students' proficiency, it is expected to avoid “frustrational reading” that may students experience (Schulz, 1981, cited in Erkaya, 2005:6).

Moreover, children short stories provide real examples of grammatical structure and vocabulary items (Pardede, 2011) which provide the students an exposure of native language that could not be encountered in EFL setting. It is consistent with Chiang (2007, cited in Khatib, 2012:241) who assumed that short stories can be an authentic material for learning language.

Researchers list several benefits in using short stories for ESL/EFL teaching such as reinforcing students' skill, motivational, literary, cultural, and higher-order thinking benefits (Erkaya, 2005:2).

Reading children short stories gives the students enough exposure to L2 reading. According to Davis, (1995, cited in Harmer, 2001:204) giving enough exposure to L2 reading can lead students to enhance their comprehension skill and add their active and passive vocabulary.

In addition, short stories can motivate students since they will explore their feelings through experiencing those that happened in the stories and they will be encouraged to continue reading it until the conflict is resolved. As Elliott (1990, 197) asserted that literature is “motivationally effective if students can genuinely engage with its thoughts and emotions and appreciate its aesthetic qualities.”

Furthermore, using short stories can teach students to develop critical thinking (Howie, 1993, cited in Erkaya, 2005: 9). He further explained that teacher has responsibility to help students in developing their cognitive skill like “make judgments, be decisive, come to conclusions, synthesize information, organize, evaluate, predict, and apply knowledge.”

Methodology

This research used qualitative approach which used classroom action research design. Qualitative approach was applied since the study was trying to capture the process that happened from the actors involved in the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1979, cited in Hatch, 2002:7). The process captured were how the learning process by using children short stories helped students’ reading comprehension and the students’ responses toward the use of children short stories.

Classroom action research was employed as the researcher tried to emphasize on action applied for improving some problems found especially reading comprehension. The classroom action research used was participatory classroom action research and the study adopted Kemmis and Mc. Taggart’s model. Kemmis and Mc. Taggart (1988, cited in O’ Brien, 1998) proposed that every component in a cycle is viewed as steps and there are 4 steps in a cycle, which are: *Plan*, *Act*, *Observe*, and *Reflect*. This study used three cycles of treatment since it was intended to ascertain students’ progress in reading comprehension. Additionally, Cycle 3 was implemented to confirm whether the students’ reading comprehension had been improved or not.

The students’ improvement was obtained by comparing the students’ score from diagnostic test and therapeutic test and observation during the learning process taken by an observer, English teacher of the class. Besides, questionnaire and interview were also employed to describe students’ response towards the use of children short stories

Participants of this study were the students of VIII D in one of junior high schools in Bandung. The total of the students were 43 students comprising 17 male students and 26 female students.

Data Presentation and Discussion

The use of children short stories was effective to improve students' reading comprehension. From all instruments, it is shown that the use of children's short stories improved the ability of students to understand the text better as well as to know more vocabulary. The result of students' average score indicated that there was a rise from 61.06 in diagnostic test to 76.28 in cycle 3 therapeutic test. Furthermore, the analysis of the questionnaire and the interview showed that most of the students have positive response towards the use of children short stories in the learning process. Nevertheless, there was a small number of students who have negative response towards the use of children short stories in the learning process.

The findings showed that the effectiveness of the use of children short stories is supported by the use of reading strategies and the characteristic of children short stories. The reading strategies were employed during the study so that the students can improve their comprehension. It is in line with previous studies that show a good reader is considered to be actively engage with the text and use comprehension strategies (Pressley & Wharton-McDonald, 1997, cited in Rice, 2009:3). The reading strategies which were used are activating students' background knowledge; pre-teaching vocabulary; using predictive skill; sequencing text; cooperative learning; asking and generating question; and story-structure analysis.

Besides reading strategies, characteristic of children short stories also contributes to the accomplishment of this study. Children short stories were discovered to be a context for the students to improve their reading comprehension. They provide real examples of grammatical structure and vocabulary items (Pardede, 2011) and they can be used as an authentic material for learning language (Chiang, 2007, cited in Khatib, 2012:241).

The use of children short stories are able to facilitate the students to improve their reading comprehension in terms of enriching their vocabulary; increasing their motivation; encouraging their critical thinking; and accommodating them to practice their language skill. Nevertheless, there are some constraints in using short stories to teach reading comprehension. Since children short stories use the language which is not simplified and intended for native, there will be many unknown words that students will encounter especially for struggling readers. Hence, it will make them discouraged in reading the story until finish.

To solve those problems, it is recommended for the teacher to select the story which is adequate in terms of length of the story, vocabulary, and content of the story. In the process of text selection, it is better to choose short story that not too long but challenging for them to read. In terms of vocabulary, the teacher should consider the difficulties and the unknown vocabulary that students may face. In terms of the content the story, it is better to choose the story which is rather unfamiliar for the students so that it will stimulate students' curiosity in reading it. Moreover, to use children short stories in the learning process, it is required for the teacher to think creatively how to plan the activity that makes the students to have direct experience so that the reading comprehension can be attained.

To conclude, the use of children short stories will provide the students to enjoy the pleasure of reading, learn how to comprehend and appreciate literature.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be drawn that the use of children short stories improved the students' reading comprehension. It can be seen from students' average scores which are slightly improved from diagnostic test until Cycle 3. The diagnostic test score which is 61.09 increased to 76.28 in the Cycle 3 therapeutic test.

In this study, the use of children short stories displayed some advantages: it facilitates the students to enrich their vocabulary; it encourages the students to have critical thinking; it increases students' motivation; and it accommodates the students to practice their language skill.

However, there was a disadvantage in using children short stories in terms of level of the text which is difficult especially for struggling readers since it is actually intended for the children in native language country. Nevertheless, it can be overcome by carefully selecting children short stories and planning the activities creatively to make the students have direct experience to the reading process.

References

- Collie, J., & Slater, S. (1991). *Literature in the language classroom. (5th ed.)*. Glasgow: Cambridge University Press.
- Elliott, R. (1990). 'Encouraging reader-response to literature in ESL situations.' In *ELT Journal*. Vol 44. No. 3 page 191-198.
- Erkaya, O. R. (2005). 'Benefits of using short stories in the EFL context'. In *Asian EFL Journal*. Vol8. page 38-49. <http://asian-efl-journal.com>. Current as of January 5th, 2013.
- Harmer, Jeremy. (2001). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Pearson Education.
- Hatch, A.J. (2002). *Doing Qualitative Research in Education Setting*. New York: State of University New York Press.
- Hayashi, Keiko. (1999). 'Reading Strategies and Extensive Reading in EFL Classes'. In *RELC Journal* Vol. 30, No.2. Page 114-132.

- Khatib, Muhammad. (2012). 'Enhancing Reading Comprehension through Short Stories in Iranian EFL Learners.' In *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. Vol.2. No.2. <http://academypublisher.com>. Current as of January 15th, 2013.
- Littlewood, William (2000). 'Literature in the School Foreign-Language Course.' In Brumfit, C.J. & Carter, R.A.. (2001). *Literature and Language Teaching*. Oxford: OUP.
- Moreillon, Judi. (2007). *Collaborative Strategies for Teaching Reading Comprehension: Maximizing Your Impact*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- O' Brien, Rory. (1998). *An Overview of the Methodological Approach of Action research*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.web.net/~robrien/papers/arfinal.html>. Current as of October 3rd, 2012.
- Palardy, J. M. (1997). 'Another look at literature-based instruction.' *Education*, 118(1), 67-70.
- Pardede, P. (2011). *Using Short Stories to Teach Language Skills* [Online]. Available at: <http://parlindunganpardede.wordpress.com/articles/language-teaching/using-short-stories-to-teach-language-skills/>. Current as of January 15th, 2013.
- Rice, Melinda. (2009). 'Making Connections: Reading Comprehension Skill and Strategies'. In www.fcrr.org/FCRRReports. Current as of January 20th, 2013.
- Syatriana, Eny. (2010). 'Developing a Model of Teaching Reading Comprehension for EFL Students'. In *TEFLIN Journal*. Vol. 3821, No. 1. Page 27-40. Current as of January 10th, 2013.
- Wallace, Catherine. (2001). 'Reading.' In Carter, R., & Nunan, D.. (2001). *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Westwood, Peter. (2008). *What Teachers Need to Know About Reading and Writing Difficulties*. Victoria: Acer Press.