

# STORYTELLING IN TEACHING VOCABULARY: an EFL Setting in Indonesian Primary School Context

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## Abstrak

Bahasa Inggris telah menjadi salah satu bahasa yang memegang peranan penting pada pergaulan tingkat global, baik didalam konteks personal maupun profesional. Di Indonesia, hal ini berpengaruh terhadap kebijakan diberlakukannya pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di tingkat sekolah dasar sejak tahun 1994. Akan tetapi, kebijakan memasukkan pelajaran bahasa Inggris pada kurikulum SD bukan tanpa masalah. Masalah yang sering dihadapi pada konteks tersebut diantaranya adalah ketersediaan guru bahasa Inggris SD yang berkualitas, yang dapat menjalankan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sesuai dengan karakteristik siswa SD. Penggunaan metode bercerita (*storytelling*) dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing telah direkomendasikan sebagai salah satu metode untuk membelajarkan *vocabulary* oleh para ahli di bidang *English as a Second/Foreign Language* (ESL/EFL). Brewster, Ellis dan Girard (2002) menyatakan bahwa penggunaan *storytelling* dapat memotivasi siswa SD untuk belajar bahasa asing, khususnya bahasa Inggris. Artikel ini membahas tentang penggunaan *storytelling* dalam membelajarkan *vocabulary* bagi siswa sekolah dasar, khususnya di kelas rendah dikaitkan dengan *the four strands approach* yang dicetuskan oleh Nation (2001). Selain itu artikel ini memuat pula contoh singkat kegiatan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris yang membelajarkan *vocabulary* pada siswa SD kelas 1 dengan mengadopsi cerita *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* karya Eric Carle.

Kata Kunci: *storytelling, vocabulary, Primary School*

## A. Introduction

This paper attempts to explain theory and practice of teaching English as a foreign language for primary school level in Indonesia. This paper will focus on the teaching of vocabulary through the medium of storytelling for the first year students of primary school. This introduction section will mainly discuss the background information of the target learners and English Language Teaching in Indonesia.

In Indonesia, in 1994, English is included into the curriculum of primary school as a subject for students from year 4 of primary school. It has become a highly recommended local content subject for primary school since 2006 (Karsidi, 2007). However, most of primary schools, especially the schools located in urban area start teaching English subject at the first year of primary

school (Ananthia, 2010). Most of the students at year 1 are at the beginning stage of their first language literacy, in other words, they just start learning how to read and write in Bahasa Indonesia. Having English lesson as one of the school subjects would be their first experience of learning English in their life.

Since English and Bahasa Indonesia has different phonic rule and spelling system of alphabet, it is believed that the teaching of English as a foreign language in low levels of primary school should not focus too much on reading and writing activities. Therefore, it should focus more on listening and speaking activities (Sutarsyah, 2004); otherwise learning English would be viewed as a constraint in achieving first language literacy.

## **B. Literature review**

### **1. Vocabulary Teaching**

Ur (1996, p. 60) roughly defines vocabulary as the words to be taught in the foreign language. It plays an important role in language learning since using a language is viewed to be able to use a set of words of that language intelligently. However, it is suggested that instead of perceiving vocabulary as set of 'words', it is better to view it as 'items', since there are 'multi-word idioms' or phrases that the meaning cannot be deduced from word per word analysis (Ur, 1996).

Despite its importance, vocabulary is not the only one that needs to be paid attention in language learning. Therefore, it is crucial to perceive the position of teaching vocabulary in a proper way. Nation (2001) states that the goals that are important in language classroom are "... L= language, which includes vocabulary, I=ideas, which covers content and subject matter knowledge as well as cultural knowledge, S=skills, and T=Text or discourse, which covers the way sentences fit together to form larger units of a language", (p.1). Thus, the place of vocabulary in language learning is considered as a sub-goal of language, together with pronunciation and grammatical construction, as other range of goals in the language classroom. Therefore, it can be concluded that the absence of vocabulary teaching in the language learning will make the language learning itself becomes incomplete.

## **2. The Four Strands Approach**

This section mainly discusses “the four strands” approach of teaching language that is propounded by Paul Nation (2001, 2002). The first strand of this approach is learning from *meaning-focused input*. It means that a language learner should be given enough exposure to the target language as the input to the learner’s language repertoire. It is likely that this strand upholds Krashen’s argument (cited in Harmer, 2001) about the language input. Listening and reading activities are believed to be suitable for this stage.

Secondly, learning from *meaning-focused output* is the next strand of the approach. Nation (2001, 2002) states that at this strand, students should be given opportunities to enhance their knowledge through speaking and writing activities. He emphasises that in this stage, learning happens in a sub-conscious way. Furthermore he also suggests that vocabulary learning needs those activities to strengthen the learners’ knowledge of previously met vocabulary.

The third strand is *language-focused learning*. This strand involves learning the form of the language. From the vocabulary perspective, it means that language learning should include the direct teaching and learning of vocabulary (Nation, 2001).

The fourth strand of the approach is *developing fluency*. This strand is applied without unknown vocabulary items. It is the time when the learners practice to perform everything what they have already learnt. This strand is employed at best when the four major skills of language; listening, speaking, reading and writing, are covered (Nation, 2002). In addition, Nation (2001, 2002) argues that to have a well-designed language course, the four strands should be applied equally, in other words, in language learning each of the strands should be employed no more than 25% of the learning and no less than 25% (Nation, 2001, p. 3).

## **3. Teaching Vocabulary in EFL Setting: The Method Of Code-Mixing**

Celik (2003) proposes *the code-mixing method* in teaching vocabulary to the learners in EFL context. The method is applied by employing L1 words in L2 expression when explaining new vocabulary. The prerequisite of using this method is that the learners must share the same L1. In addition, Celik states that it is better that the teacher also share the same L1 as the learners. Nonetheless, it is not impossible to conduct this method when the teacher does not have the same L1 background, yet this kind of situation needs “...additional research and checking is required for the L1/L2 correspondence”, (Celik, 2003: p.6). Furthermore, Celik (2006) argues the using of code-mixing method in teaching new vocabulary as an efficient and effective method since it can save time and be more practical to be applied in the EFL setting. Giving translation as a strategy in introducing new vocabulary is mainly employed in this method.

However, despite its practicality, Ur (1996) warns that the using of translation could lead to the difficulty of finding exact equivalents words across languages, thus it needs careful consideration in conducting this method in the language learning program. Harmer (1991, cited in Celik, 2003) also advises that this method should be carefully planned since it has the possibility to discourage students to use the new vocabulary of the target language.

#### **4. Storytelling in the foreign language classroom**

##### **a. Why Is Storytelling?**

A very robust argument on the employment of storybooks and storytelling in teaching new vocabulary has been upheld by some of scholars in the field of ESL/EFL teaching methodology, such as Garvie, (1990), Wright (1995), Ur (1996), Nation (2002) and Brewster, Ellis and Gurrard (2002). Moreover, since the target learners of this paper are the Indonesian first year students of primary school, which can be categorised into young learners, the using of storytelling in the English language classroom will motivate them to learn English as a foreign language, which is quite new to them.

In relation with the above argument, the using of storytelling technique in language classroom will give some positive benefits to the students achievement in acquiring new language and vocabulary as Brewster, *et.al* (2002, p.186) note

that “Children enjoy listening to stories in their L1 and understand the conventions of narrative”. Furthermore, Brewster, *et.al* (2002) list 14 benefits that is resulted from the using of storytelling technique in the language classroom. The benefits vary from the point of view of the learners’ social and personal life, culture, to the benefits in fostering students’ ability in learning the language itself. Let me focus to the latter benefits.

Brewster, *et.al* (2002) argue that learning English through stories allows the teacher to introduce, revise, and recycling (new) vocabulary, teach the structure of the language, and above all give the learners the exposure to the language which will enhance their thinking and gradually enter their own speech. Accordingly, it is likely believed that listening to stories will enrich the learners in terms of learning basic language functions and structures, vocabulary and language-learning skills, as a foundation when they continue to the upper level of education (Brewster, *et.al.*, 2002).

#### b. Who Is The Storyteller?

As it has been mentioned above that the target learners in this paper are the Indonesian first year students of primary school, therefore the one that presents the story should be the teacher. The teacher’s role as the storyteller, as suggested by Krashen (1990, cited in Brewster, *et.al.*, 2002), is functioned as a comprehensible input which provides ideal condition for the acquisition of the language a little beyond the learner’s current competence level.

#### c. Reading or Telling Stories?

Wright (1995) and Brewster, *et.al.* (2002) have examined the differences between reading a story book aloud and telling a story in the language classroom. When the teacher chooses to read a story from a storybook, it means that everything is provided from the book. If the teacher prefers telling a story, it means that s/he needs to remember the story by heart. Wright (1995) and Brewster, *et.al.* (2002) also investigate both the advantages and disadvantages of the two ways of presenting the story to the young learners. Nevertheless, this paper will not discriminate those two different terms and ways of delivering story

to the children as the students of primary school. In other words, this paper views that either reading or telling story is considered as having a storytelling activity.

#### d. Storytelling as a Medium of Learning Vocabulary in EFL Classroom Setting

After acknowledging the rationale behind the employment of storytelling in the teaching and learning language, knowing the teacher's role when storytelling technique is adopted in the classroom and having a clarification of the storytelling term, it is apposite to have a deeper discussion on how they could be applied in my context, that is, the EFL setting in Indonesian first year students of primary school. In the context of teaching vocabulary through storytelling, I would like to apply the four strands approach, as it has been mentioned formerly, in conducting the teaching and learning process with the first year students of primary school. However, some modifications will be made regarding the background of the target learners. The code-mixing method is also applicable in this context as an alternative way in teaching new vocabulary when giving the L1 most equivalent words could be as the more time-saving way compared to the avoidance of using translation of L1.

*Meaning-focused input* as the first strand would be applied as the first activity of the lesson. In this stage the teacher functions his/her role as the storyteller. The teacher gives the learners the exposure to the target language through the storytelling activity. Nation (2001) recommends that in this strand the learners should be familiar with at least 95% of the words in target language. This implies that if the storytelling is chosen as the means of the language input, the teacher is only allowed to introduce 5% of the new vocabularies from the whole story. Yet, how could this recommendation is fulfilled if that is the first time the learners are being introduced to English lesson? Moreover, Brewster, *et.al.* (2002) advise the educators to be aware of a caveat that the learners still in the process building up their L1 vocabulary concept. We can infer that, learning a vocabulary in the foreign language could be a complex matter.

The using of the picture stories is believed can gain the language elicitation from the language learners and enhance their communication strategies, fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary development (Rossiter, Derwing & Jones,

2008). Celik (2003) and Hciu-Chih (2008) uphold the argument by agreeing that the using of picture can be used as one of the ways to introduce new vocabulary and can develop the learners' comprehension. Besides using picture, actually there are several techniques to introduce new vocabulary and convey meaning, such as showing the real objects, using drawing on the blackboard or flashcards, using action, mime, expressing, gesture, giving the learners exposures to use their senses, and using technology (Brewster, *et.al.*, 2002). Therefore the advice of having at least 95% familiar words in the meaning-focused input can be covered by the employment of the pictures and other techniques in teaching new vocabulary to the young beginner, since those techniques are expected could encode the meaning for the learners' language input. The code-mixing method would also be used at this strand as scaffolding which will be withdrawn as soon as the learners quite confident to make sense of the target language meaningfully.

In addition, it is suggested that listening and reading activities to be conducted in this strand (Nation 2001). However, in my context, I would only employ the listening activity because the learners still at the very beginning level of their L1 literacy. In other words, they just started how to read using Bahasa Indonesia's alphabet spelling system.

Secondly, the next strand is *meaning-focused output*. Nation (2001) suggests that this strand could be conducted by having speaking and writing activities to give students the opportunity to perform what they have already learnt. On the contrary, it seems that writing in English could not be applied yet due to the learners' literacy ability. Therefore I might exclude the writing activity.

Similarly, the speaking activity could not be performed yet at this stage to anticipate the learners' silent period, as mentioned by young learners ESL/EFL scholars, such as Cameron (2001), Brewster *et.al.* (2002) and Pinter (2006). The reason is because English is still new to the learners. Therefore in this stage, the learners would be given opportunities to perform their new knowledge by having Total Physical Response (TPR) activities. TPR is a language teaching method that is claimed to be suitable for beginners and young learners (Brewster *et.al.* 2002). Furthermore, Brewster *et.al.* (2002, p.35) also acknowledge the strength of TPR

for young language learners as they state that “...it involves learners in listening to something and then showing their understanding by their actions and responses”. The inference we can draw from the statement is, that besides speaking and writing activity, TPR could be one of the ways to give the learners opportunity to perform what they have learnt. Therefore in this case, I am opposed to Nation’s argument which says that this strand could only be conducted by speaking and writing activities.

The third strand is *language-focused learning*. According to Nation (2001), this strand includes the direct teaching of vocabulary. The code-mixing method is suitable to be adopted at this strand. It is used when the picture or other techniques could not convey the meaning of the target language to the learners’ understanding. Therefore the teacher explanation using the L1 as the translation would be applied.

The last strand is *developing fluency*. Nation (2001, 2002) encourages that this strand must not contain unfamiliar words. Not to mention that it is the right time for the teacher to maximise the opportunity for the learners practising the new vocabulary they have learnt. Since it is assumed that in this stage the learners has gradually passed their silent period, they will be asked to perform their-what so called *fluency*. In my context, I would like to ask the students to complete a worksheet. In order to complete the worksheet, they have to do a small research, which should be conducted by having simple conversations (which could be conducted in their L1) among them. The detailed explanation regarding how to apply *the four strands approach* will be elaborated at the section of activities.

#### e. Selecting Appropriate Story

Before doing the storytelling activity in the language classroom, the teacher as the storyteller should consider about what kind of story would be delivered to the learners. Referring to the research conducted in Taiwan, Hciu-Chih (2008) suggests that there are three values in selecting storybook related to the educational perspective in EFL setting; there are “...1) linguistic value, 2) the value of the stories, and 3) the value of the pictures” (p. 48). Meanwhile,



Brewster, *et.al.* (2002) advise the aspects of accessibility, usefulness, and relevance as criteria in choosing storybook. All of those values and aspects should be taken into account when planning a storytelling in the foreign language classroom.

Accordingly, from the point of view of vocabulary learning, the teacher should consider the linguistic level of the learners. For the learners in my context, the teacher should select a story which is linguistically less complicated. The values of the stories and pictures also need to be considered so that the learners could enhance appreciation and enjoyment of literature as a motivation in learning English as a foreign language (Brewster, *et. al.* 2002)

Furthermore, the aspect of accessibility should be also taken into consideration. If, for example the teacher has decided a particular storybook, and it is easy to get, then there would be no problem to bring the book to the classroom, and tell (or read) the story to the students. However, more often than not, in Indonesia, it is quite hard to find a good quality English storybook for children. If it is available, the price would not be affordable. It is often that the teachers of English in Indonesian primary schools are introduced to a good children storybook through some seminars and workshops on English for Young Learners (EYL). In other words, several teachers from different schools only have access to one storybook.

If it is the case, the teacher should create another way to present the story accompanied by the illustrations or the pictures so that the students could convey the story meaningfully and be able to increase their new English vocabulary into their language repertoire. Damayanti (2007, p.1) recommends storytelling activity with young language learners since it is considered as “cheap but rich” media especially in the Indonesian context where many classrooms have been claimed to be under-resourced and where many schools and students cannot afford to buy storybooks and sometimes even course books. When English picture storybook is not available, the teacher could prepare his/her-own-made *wayang* to replace the picture/ illustration in the storybook.

Actually, *wayang* is an Indonesian traditional puppet that is used to spread the Islamic values in the era of Hinduism and Buddhism in Indonesia. For the purpose of EFL learning, *wayang* could be made by drawing the pictures on a quite hard surface, such as thick paper. It could be the characters of or the objects in the story. After colouring the picture, it should be cut according to its shape, then attach a stick so that the storyteller could hold the stick when showing the *wayang* in the storytelling activity. It is therefore important for the teacher to memorise the plot of the story by heart.

#### f. Teacher's Preparation

After being ready with the selected story- whether read it from the book or memorise it by heart- and with the *wayang* of the characters and objects in the story- as extra supports to give meaning and elicitate vocabulary, there is other thing that should be prepared by the teacher as the storyteller. Brewster, *et.al.* (2002) advice that the teacher should be ready and confident with some different techniques to provide the learners' understanding of the story. Based on Brewster *et.al.* (2002) suggestions on the techniques that should be prepared, my conclusion is that the teacher as the storyteller should be able to; 1) read/tell the story clearly and slowly, however, the variation of the pace is also needed, 2) use gesture and facial expression, and mime to help the students get the meaning, 3) encourage the students to get involved in the storytelling activity by repeating key vocabulary items and phrase and asking what is going to happen next (the teacher need to repeat their answer to show they have predicted correctly, or extend/rephrase their answer to get the expected words/sentences), and the last, 4) vary the tone and volume of the voice (the teacher could also disguise his/her voice for the different characters).

#### **4. Vocabulary Learning Through Storytelling: the Example of Some Activities in Indonesian EFL Setting**

This section presents some activities that are conducted in vocabulary teaching and learning through storytelling in Indonesian EFL setting. The types of the classroom activities will be divided based on Nation's (2002) *the four strands*

*approach* of language learning. The strands could be conducted at the same time or different meeting/day. The more detail example is only given at the first strand, whereas the rest of the strand would only be described briefly. The Celik's (2003) code-mixing method could be applied when the students need the teacher's scaffolding to clarify meaning. The following paragraph informs the background of the students.

The students are at the first year of primary school. Learning English is still a new thing for them. They have learnt some numbers (1-10) and basic colours in English. They also have already known how to reply the greeting in English.

The story that would be delivered is titled *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, written by Eric Carle (1974). The storybook "has become an international superstar on the EFL front", (Rixon, 1992, cited in Brewster, *et.al.* 2002). The story would be used as the basic main theme under the four meetings, to give the opportunity for the students to recycle the words and some phrases. However, this book is still relatively new to some of the Indonesian English primary school teachers and the book is quite hard to find in Indonesia, especially in my area, Bandung. Therefore, most of the teachers would not be able to take the book to the classroom. Yet, through some of the seminars and workshops, they are familiar with the story. In this kind of situation I would employ the using of *wayang* during the storytelling activity.

#### a. language-focused input

- Overview of the unit: this unit will cover the students' previous knowledge of numbers and colours, new vocabularies of animals (caterpillar, butterfly and related word cocoon), fruits, and the names of the days in a week.
- Activity: Listening to a story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* written by Eric Carle.
- Aims: getting the students familiar with some words: story, caterpillar, cocoon and butterfly, some fruits, food, and days in a week and phrases: "but I'm still hungry", and "do you like...?".
- Time allotment: 35 minutes
- Target learners: first year students of primary school

1) Pre-activity

Teacher (T): Good Morning Class.

Students (S): Good Morning Ms. Winti.

T: Today we are going to listen to a story. Do you like story? *Suka mendengarkan dongeng?*

S: *Suka...*

T: Yes, we are going to listen to a story.

2) Whilst Activity

T: One night, a little egg lay on a leaf. *(T shows the wayang of egg and leaf and make a gesture on the word 'little')*

One Sunday morning, the sun came up and-pop!-out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar. *(T shows the wayang of the sun and exaggerates the word pop to create a suspense. Again, T makes particular gesture on the words tiny and hungry, while showing the wayang of caterpillar).*

He started to look for some food.

On Monday, he ate through one apple. But he was still hungry. *(T shows the wayang of an apple, and makes gesture of hungry)*

One apple, but still hungry *(T makes a repetition so that S could think and convey the meaning. When making the hungry gesture, there is a possibility that S would relate it with the L1 by saying 'lapar'. In this case, T should give a positive response by saying: good, hungry).*

What have the caterpillar eaten? *Apa saja ya yang sudah dimakan?* What have the caterpillar eaten? *(T tries to involve the students by asking them some question. While doing this, T should show the wayang of the apple. The expected answer is one apple).*

One Tuesday, he ate through two pears, but he was still hungry *(T shows the wayang of two pears, and makes gesture of hungry and so forth).*

The teacher continues telling the story by showing the appropriate wayang based on the plot of the story. Some words from L1 are used as a scaffolding. Every time the caterpillar ate through the food, the teacher should

always recycle the vocabulary items by asking the students what and fruits food that have been eaten by the caterpillar. This activity usually makes the students to following the teacher to mention the items.

b. language-focused output

At this strand, the students are asked to perform their understanding of what they have learnt so far. In this situation, TPR activity would be employed. The students are asked to recount what kind of food and fruits that have been eaten by the caterpillar. The treasure hunt activity seems to be suitable for this stage. The teacher would like to ask the students to compete in a group to find out the food mentioned by the teacher. For example, the teacher would say: “*five oranges!*”, so the students compete to find the picture of five oranges. The pictures should be hidden before. This activity could be performed in pairs or in group.

c. language focus learning

The third strand requires the direct teaching of the language. In the context of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* story, the names of the days in a week are quite difficult to teach through pictures or gesture. Therefore the direct teaching is needed, in this case. At this level, the students usually have already known the L1 version of the names of the days in a week. There is also an L1 song about it. To teach the names of the days in English, the teacher could modify the familiar L1 song by changing the words into the English version.

d. developing fluency

At this final strand, students need to perform their communication ability using English. The activity for this stage would be completing a worksheet adapted from Brewster, *et.al.* (2002). The students are asked to do some class food survey by asking for example: “*Do you like strawberry?*” The list of the food should be what has been eaten by the caterpillar.

### **C. Conclusion**

The employment of the storytelling activities in the teaching and learning activity has been upheld by most of the experts in ESL/EFL field. The presence of

pictures could also support to enrich students' vocabulary in the foreign language learning. Nation's 'the four stands approach' of vocabulary teaching could be applied in primary school context. The teacher's creativity is also needed when there is a limited access to the source. Making wayang as a media to convey meaning could be one of the solutions.

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