



**ESTABLISHING RICH LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AT SCHOOLS:  
PREPARING CHILDREN TO BECOME AUTONOMOUS EFL LEARNERS**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the findings of a Research and Development on Rich language Learning Environment (RLLE) Model that can accommodate young learners' need to learn English at schools despite the limitation of allocated time, tools and facilities. The product of the research was a set of materials for Primary English Language Teaching (PELT) that can help young learners progress with their English language. The materials were exposed to grade 4, 5 and 6 in six primary schools in Bali. Literacy test in English were conducted prior and after the 3 month-exposure was done. The findings reveal the positive impact of the exposure on learners' literacy skills in English and at the same time improve learners' willingness to learn English at their own time and on the topic of interest. Thus, RLLE does not only help young learners with their literacy skills in English but also improve their autonomous learning skills – the learning that is the results of learners' own responsibility and motivation to learn without any intervention from adults or teacher. The model is recommended for PELT in Indonesia as English has now been discarded from the primary school curriculum.

**Keywords:** primary English language teaching, rich language learning environment autonomous learning

**INTRODUCTION**

There are many reasons why it is an advantage for non-English speaking countries to equip their young generation with proficiency in English language. First, competency in English is a strategic preparation for occupational field (Blair, 1997; Marcelo, 2010; Aina et al., 2013). One who has good English language competency will be able to effectively participate in the global work place. Marcelo further states "Employers of today's global market want people that have not only international experience and good qualification that are recognized all over the world but also high proficiency in spoken and written English". Countries like the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Japan, etc. have done their best efforts to improve the quality of their curriculum and English instructions at schools. In Japan, for example, since 1985, 30% students start learning English at young age (Blair, 1997). This figure can be expected to increase time by time.

The second reason is related to research findings that proficiency in English is correlated to academic achievement in other subjects. Aina, et al., (2013) points out that during the process of learning a foreign language the learners develop strategies that are advantageous for learning other subjects. Thus, schools should establish and maintain quality English instructions to assure success in English language learning as well as high achievement in other school subjects.

The third reason is to do with the theory that language and culture are inseparable. It means that when someone learn a new language, s/he unconsciously also learn the culture of the native speakers of the language. The impact of this is positive attitudes towards other people and cultures as put forward by Ng and Wigglesworth (2007) who argue that English language learners develop character values of openness, acceptance and tolerance toward other cultures. This is why the attitudes toward bilingual education, which involves a foreign language (usually English) has flourished in the last decades.



The fourth reason is related to globalization. One of the issues in the era of globalization, that makes learning English a must, is the establishment of the upcoming Asian Economic Community (AEC). This is projected to begin in 2015. AEC will certainly require highly competitive human resources, one indicator of which is ability to speak and write in English. This should be anticipated by all countries in Asian region, including Indonesia.

In the context of Bali, where tourism industry has been booming since the eighties (Jennaway, 2002), proficiency in English has been considered as an asset. Tourism in Bali has brought about significant growth in the local economy (Pitana, 1994). Young Balinese with proficiency in English have better opportunities to win the 'competition' in the labor force, especially in the field of tourism industries. This can be the main reason why young Balinese perceive English as an important language to learn and believe that abilities to speak English improve their chances for better future (Artini, 2006).

Despite its importance, efforts to improve the quality English instructions in Indonesian public schools in general, or in Bali, in particular, tend to be limited to class activities. Most English teachers have gone through education and trainings on how to conduct joyful and effective EFL learning, however, limitation of time, tools and facilities, makes learning to become more controlled. In other words, the teacher decides on everything in the classroom (i.e. the goals, the materials, the strategies for the students to fulfill the task, and the strategies to assess students' achievement). Learners are targeted to achieve better academic achievement as reflected in a test result, not competency in the language per se.

Controlled learning usually teacher-centered in nature. With limited resources and facilities to learn in Indonesian public schools, teachers usually become the only source of learning in the classroom, and a textbook is the only learning material. This does not support Johnson's (2007) for whom ideal learning should result in permanent change of behavior. In the context of EFL learning, permanent change may refer to confidence in the four language skills so that learners become active communicators in the target language. Thus, it is not difficult to imagine how much EFL learners achieve from a controlled system of learning.

There are different opinions about when EFL learning should start. Research in the past found that it is better to start English language learning at young age since young learners possess flexible language acquisition devices that make them learn a new language relatively faster than adults (Long, 1990). Later research conducted by Schmid (2011) maintains that children are better language learners than adults. He states "While normally developing children reach native-like proficiency, late learners hardly do". When EFL teaching and learning starts at early age and is properly practiced, there is a potency for pertaining competitive human resources in the future (Mitchell & Myles, 2004 in Hayes, 2007).

English has been part of local content curriculum in primary schools in Indonesia since 1994. Public primary schools could make a decision whether or not to teach English to their students, depending on the need of the local community and availability of human resource to teach this foreign language. As has been mentioned earlier, Balinese perception about the importance of English proficiency is related to the popularity of Bali as an international tourist destination. Parents prefer to send their children to a public school that provides English subject or to private schools with quality English language teaching program. With the implementation of the latest curriculum (i.e. Curriculum 2013) English in primary schools is officially discarded from the curriculum. This causes reluctance from the part of the schools of whether or not to maintain English as a school subject.

This research was inspired by the discrepancy between the government policy regarding PELT and the expectations of the local community about English language teaching at schools. Some primary



schools keep going with their English language program with the allocated time varies from 35 to 70 minutes per week, while some others replace the program with art and crafts. It is a common practice that in PELT in Indonesia in general, or Bali in particular, students are mostly engaged in highly controlled activities, where they are assigned to work on a worksheet and then teacher check whether what they did right or wrong.

Watanabe (2009) argues against controlled learning. This scholar points out that learning should not only occur inside the class, but also outside of the class in the learners' convenient time. Yelland (2006), further states that learning a foreign language should be supported by a 'rich language learning environment' from where children can learn without a control from a teacher. Interesting, eye catching, as well as educating learning materials within the closest environment of learners should be made available.

This research developed a rich language learning environment (hereafter, RLLE) by adapting the theoretical framework of *multiple literacy experiences* (Winch, et.al., 2006). This theory emphasizes the need for exposing learners with different kinds of texts in such a way that they learn language and meaning at their convenient time. RLLE materials should consider learners' language needs, children's learning characteristics and real life contexts for children. The design of the RLLE should provide choices and system for feedback so that learners' motivation and enthusiasm to learn English can be maintained and improved. Thus, RLLE facilitates learners to be responsible of their own learning and decide on their own learning goals.

One of the indicators of successful learning is it should results in permanent change of behaviors (Johnson, 2007). This could be established when learning occurs continuously and meaningfully. Developing RLLE for EFL learners is an effort to encourage autonomous learning that will result in the permanent ownership of what have been learnt. Thus, this autonomous learning in EFL is important since learning it in the classroom only will not be sufficient for the learners to become creative language users. In line with this, Holec (1979) maintains that it is important to train learners to become autonomous with their language learning so that they progress naturally in meaningful and flexible learning context, as revealed in the following citation.

“...autonomous language learner takes responsibility for the totality of his learning situation. He does this by determining his own objectives, defining the contents to be learned and the progression of the course, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring this procedure, and evaluating what he has acquired (Holec, 1979)

When learners get used to autonomous learning, they can be expected to develop lifelong learning habit that is very important for the nation quality human resources.

## METHOD

The research employed Dick and Carey's (1990) which comprised eight stages: needs analysis, instructional analysis, learners and context analysis, setting up goals, assessment instrument development, instructional strategy development, instructional material development and selection, summative evaluation development, and implementation. The subjects of the study were Grades 4, 5, and 6 of six primary schools located in four regencies in Bali. These schools were selected since the English teachers in those schools were previously involved in the pilot project of English in Primary Schools (2008-2010).

The RLLE materials were developed in the form of various texts with illustrative pictures. The materials were graded and every week one set of materials was exposed on the display board in front of each classroom. The content and organization of RLLE was designed in such a way that young



learners have choices of printed texts with interesting and illustrative pictures from which they can learn words, expressions and meaning without intervention from the teacher. The materials were displayed in a strategic spot around the class so that students can access these with ease. Each student was given a RLLE journal which was compatible to the exposed materials. The various texts comprised: a) *topical vocabulary*, b) *everyday expressions*, c) *grammar focus*, d) *language games* and e) *time for stories*. These are described briefly below.

### **Topical Vocabulary (TV)**

This part comprised lists of vocabulary on the topics as advised in the curriculum. For example, for the topic of 'family', the students were exposed to the words *father*, *mother*, *older sister*, *younger brother*, and so on, with pictures. These words were displayed on the display board with interesting illustrative picture so that students could understand meaning by making connection between the words and the pictures.

### **Everyday Expressions (EE)**

This part included everyday expressions relevant to the topics in the curriculum. For example, for the topic of Parts of Body, students were exposed to expressions like: *I have a headache*, *She has short hair*, and so on.

### **Grammar Focus (GF)**

This part comprised sentences with repeated pattern so learners could internalized the grammatical rules. For the topic of Transportation, for example, the use of simple present tense is presented in the sentences like: *Lily goes to school by bicycle*. *Mr. Jaya goes to work by car*. *Danan goes to his friend's house by motorbike*. By doing the tasks in the GF section in their RLLE journal, learners could their grammatical competency.

### **Language Games (LG)**

This part comprised language learning games such as *Spider Web* that were filled in by the students with vocabulary from the display; or *Hidden Message*, in which students discovered a message by using clues. This kind of game activity did not require the learners to work in groups. The individual language learning game helps students recognize words and their meanings as well as the correct spelling.

### **Time for Stories (TfS)**

This part comprised longer texts, where all the aspects were put together into a story. The story was written on loose pages. Every week, only two pages were displayed so that learners became curious to know how the story went. The stories were specially designed to be compatible with the topic of the English lessons. Every week student may copy parts of the story and answer comprehension questions in their journals.

Each learner was given a RLLE journal where they could work on the tasks related to the displayed materials. This made English language learning more systematic and purposeful. Every week the learners showed their teachers what they had done in the journals. The teacher motivated them by putting a stamp or motivating comments.

The development of five types of texts was based on English syllabus for Grades 4, 5 and 6 so that the formal in-class and RLLE materials were complementary to one another. Illustrations in the form of pictures or photos were specially created or were downloaded from on-line resources which were properly referenced. Prior to the field testing, the content and organization of the materials were judged by six expert judges (two judges for each grade). The field testing involves 500 primary school

students. Interviews with students and teachers were also conducted to collect data on their perceptions about the provision of the rich learning environment. Before the exposure to RLLE materials, a pre-test on students' ability to read and write in English was carried out. After the three month trial period of display and activities, a literacy post-test was conducted. The difference between the pre and post test results was examined through t-test formula.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first findings were related to how Grade 4, 5, and 6 students perceived the RLLE materials displayed on their classroom walls. Based on the observation, students were found to have positive attitudes toward the materials. As soon as the recess bell rang, they flocked together in front of the display board and attentively looked at every part of the display. On the first two days, student only looked curiously at the materials, and then on the third day, some students started doing work on their journals. Subsequently, more and more students worked on their journals every day. They copied words into their journals, filled in the speech bubbles with everyday expressions or answered questions about the story. They either completed the activity individually, in pairs or in groups of three or four. Every time they finished one set of work, they showed it to their teacher who then stamped their work with a smiley face.

When they were asked questions about the exposure to RLLE materials, all responses were positive. They said that the materials were good and interesting. The followings are citations from the interview

#S12/B4: *Materinya bagus, saya suka...*

[The materials are good, I like them ...]

#S21/S5: *Gambarnya lucu-lucu, ada yang seperti adik saya.*

[The pictures are funny, one looks like my younger sibling]

The excerpts above indicate that the children were at first more interested in the pictures and illustrations. This is evaluated as positive in attracting their interest. Wherever possible, locally relevant images were used so the students could relate to them. The following are examples of photos for vocabulary related to the topic of Family:



**Illustration 01:** Pictures to introduce Topical Vocabulary about family in the RLLE.

The strength of the pictures or illustrations was in their close fit to the everyday life of the children who were predominantly Balinese. In addition, both diversity of images and authenticity of photos added to the interpretive value of textual materials.

### Students' Literacy Skills in English before and after RLLE

To describe the impact of RLLE on students EFL learning, the results of pre and post tests on English literacy skills were compared using independent sample t-test. The tests comprised: (1) vocabulary (unscrambling, selecting appropriate words, filling in blanks), (2) sentence and expressions (reordering words to make sentences, to complete sentences), and (3) writing up simple descriptive texts.

Prior to RLLE material exposure, the primary school students under investigation were found to have very low literacy skills in English. For example, in Grade 4, most could not spell the word 'Friday' properly. They instead wrote: *Fritdy*, *Fride*, or *Frydy*. This is probably due to the limited time for English in the classroom, or the focus of learning was unclear. However, when asked to name the days of the week in English, they did not seem to have any problem.

After three months of intensive exposure to RLLE materials, the children's vocabulary grew and their comprehension toward written English text improved. Their spelling ability was also found to improve. This can be seen in the following data.

**Table 01:** Comparison of Literacy Skill Scores Before and After the RLLE Exposure

School	Literacy skill scores								
	WORDS			SENTENCES/EXPRESSI			SIMPLE		TEXT
	Before			ON			WRITING		
	After			Before			After		
	Grade	Grade	Grade	Grade	Grade	Grade 6	Grade 4	Grade	Grade
	4	5	6	4	5		4	5	6
SD No 1 Sulahan	33.6	43.7	23	22.4	38.1	26	9.3	39	25.8
	<b>57.2</b>	<b>59.4</b>	<b>50.2</b>	<b>30.7</b>	<b>45.3</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>22.1</b>	<b>47.1</b>	<b>40.3</b>
SD No 2 Cempaga	6.9	20.2	12.3	17.6	30.4	36.3	20	32.8	29.5
	<b>37.1</b>	<b>40.7</b>	<b>32.4</b>	<b>27.2</b>	<b>34.4</b>	<b>38.1</b>	<b>28.2</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>36.4</b>
SD No 7 Pedungan	26.8	22.8	32.8	12.4	21.6	14.4	20.2	24.2	28.2
	<b>40.5</b>	<b>39.4</b>	<b>44.4</b>	<b>22.1</b>	<b>27.6</b>	<b>20.2</b>	<b>30.1</b>	<b>41.3</b>	<b>41.1</b>
SD No 1 Kayubih	26.2	28.8	22.2	20.4	22.6	24.6	28.4	29.1	28.2
	<b>46.2</b>	<b>45.1</b>	<b>40.7</b>	<b>30.5</b>	<b>34.1</b>	<b>25.6</b>	<b>29.9</b>	<b>39.2</b>	<b>35.6</b>
SD	12.2	20.1	10.2	18.4	20.2	19.2	16.8	18.2	5.2
Muhammadiyah	<b>31.1</b>	<b>40.4</b>	<b>33.1</b>	<b>20.6</b>	<b>24.9</b>	<b>27.1</b>	<b>22.2</b>	<b>24.2</b>	<b>16.7</b>
<b>AVERAGE</b>									
<b>Before</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>27.1</b>	<b>20.1</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>26.6</b>	<b>18.9</b>	<b>18.9</b>	<b>28.7</b>	<b>23.4</b>
<b>After</b>	<b>42.4</b>	<b>45.0</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>26.2</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>30.2</b>	<b>26.5</b>	<b>38.4</b>	<b>34.0</b>
<b>Improvement</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>25.2%</b>	<b>59.8%</b>	<b>40.2%</b>	<b>33.8%</b>	<b>45.3%</b>

The t-test results confirm the effectiveness of English language exposure toward learners' literacy skills in English. For example, exposure to topical vocabulary supplemented with interesting illustrative pictures was found effective to improve 88.7% of learners' English vocabulary mastery. Similarly, learners' ability to construct sentences and expressions in English improved 43%. This is in line with Artini (2009a) who maintains that every individual has a dynamic quality in learning a new language. The use of appropriate media helps young learners to activate that dynamic quality to learn more effectively.

The least improvement was in the ability to produce a written short text (39.8%). Students were found to struggle to express their ideas into a written text. This was not unexpected because writing in English is the most complex skill. For beginner English language learning, writing is challenging because it involves vocabulary, grammar, sentence formation and other mechanics of writing in a foreign language. The ability to remember and spell words is obviously easier than combining words into grammatically correct sentences. The more difficult the textual task the slower the improvement that can be achieved. This is understandable since working with complex materials needs a longer time to master. This can be seen in the level of literacy development that occurred as an outcome of RLLE exposure. From the easiest to the most difficult; young learners found it easier to remember words, their meaning and their spelling; followed by sentence level competency and finally capacity for text writing. This finding implies that at the primary school level, English texts and tasks need to be introduced in a carefully ordered sequence of complexity so that learning progress will occur optimally.

During the three months of RLLE exposure, learners might have gone through a more productive experience with EFL learning. There is a possible mutual support toward learning; the RLLE supports in class learning, and in class learning supports their internalization of concepts and



**Illustration 02.** RLLE and Student independent learning

meaning in English language. Intensive and continuous RLLE exposure combined with regular in-class English lessons can be expected to optimally improve learners' literacy skills in English. In other words, formal exposure to English language learning in the classroom is insufficient for optimal progress in English. Thus, the provision of RLLE is important. As Scott & Ytreberg (2004) point out, formal learning of a foreign language is not enough. Supplementary materials are needed to optimize learner achievement.

The RLLE exposure provides students the opportunity to read and write in their own time. The texts and journal writing activities positively support the formal in-class spoken language (Department of National Education, 2009).

The spoken language is introduced through listening and repeating activities, following instructions and responding to simple questions or elicitations. The other activity that usually takes most of the allocated time is working on English worksheet. Students are assigned to do multiple choice tasks on grammar and vocabulary, and then teacher checked if what they did right or wrong. When working on RLLE tasks, students have freedom to decide on what to do. They may start with reading and figure out the meanings of words, sentences or stories. They may do activities of copying down, writing up or creating sentences of their own, which builds their written literacy skills. In short, the provision of RLLE materials in school premises can fill the gap for young learners to acquire written English skills in a more natural way.

Based on the observation, students were found enthusiastic and motivated to learn independently. Each student did what they liked and was not controlled by any adults in the school community. In other words, students feel psychologically secure because there is neither interference nor comments that what they did is right or wrong. This, of course, will bring positive impact to both their language competency and attitudes to leaning. The most important is that they are trained on



how to be responsible towards their own learning. The following picture shows the enthusiasm of Grade 4 students to read and write from the displayed RLLE materials.

Moore (*online source*) mentioned the importance of autonomous learning on personal quality development as revealed in this quotation, “Autonomous learning develops personal qualities: confidence, motivation, taking and accepting responsibility, and ability to take initiative. It involves a set of skills: academic, intellectual,...”. These qualities are the bases of character buildings that become the important issues in Indonesian national education. Schmid (2011) further states that autonomous learning prepares learners to become self-directed and develop abilities to reason logically and solve problem effectively”

Autonomous learning has been around for decades (see for example: Holec (1979); Higgs (1988); Dickinson (1992); Shen (1993); Nunan, 1995; Dianyu, 2005). However, it has not been addressed much in the practice of teaching and learning in Indonesian schools. Character education becomes the major issue in Indonesian education and its implementation is focused on formal teaching. The provision of rich learning environment that lead the students develop self directed learning is a more natural way to develop the intended character values.

## CONCLUSION

This research has come up with a product (RLLE materials) and an impact (improvement in literacy skills in English). The product can be used to supplement the ‘in-class’ materials so that the students can maximize their language learning potentials. The impact is not only on competencies in English as a foreign language but also motivation and enthusiasm to learn the language independently. In fact, the most important of all is that the RLLE model potentially develops autonomous learning (i.e. learning which is student-self directed), so that students develop personal qualities like responsibilities to own learning, abilities to take initiatives, confidence, and hard working.

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