

After Three-Year Immersion in the Australian Mainstream Classroom: Towards More Advanced ESL Literacy Learning Development

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Abstract: This article is one of two studies about literacy learning of Aida, an Indonesian young English language learner who was mainstreamed in an Australian primary school in Melbourne. It described the development of her more advanced literacy learning. This article suggests that a learner's literacy learning of ESL in the mainstream classroom can be facilitated if there are a number of contributing factors, especially those related to literacy learning policies, learning environment, and teachers' role.

Key words: literacy learning, English as a second language, mainstream classroom.

This article concerns literacy learning development of a young Indonesian learner of English as a second language (ESL) who was immersed in an Australian classroom along with the native speakers of English. Because instruction, teaching and learning process, and other pedagogical activities in such a classroom are provided in English, the language of the mainstream students, this type of classroom is called *mainstream classroom*.

Extensive literature has shown that a mainstream classroom with a special feature can be fruitful for second language learners' development of language skills and, more particularly, their literacy learning. For example, Genesee (1994) argues that it is a necessity for the second language learner to learn and use the second language in the mainstream classroom in order that he or she can be involved socially and can succeed academically. Accordingly, in addition to providing the needs of learning for most of the students, the mainstream classroom should also fulfil the language need of the second language learner (Gibbons, 1993; Linning, 2000). According to Gibbons (1993), the mainstream classroom should

provide “a comfortable learning environment” and “opportunities for meaningful interaction between peers” (p. 11). Likewise, Tabors and Snow (1994, p. 123) have stated that the mainstream classroom should provide a great deal of opportunities for the second language learner to interact with other students and the teacher. Based on their research, Platt and Troudi (1997) have argued that a warm and friendly environment enables a second language learner to participate successfully in the mainstream classroom. Thus, meaningful interaction and supportive learning environment in the mainstream classroom facilitate the development of second language and academic learning of second language learners.

This article is a sequel of a study which analyzed early literacy learning in English as a second language (ESL) of Aida, an Indonesian young learner of ESL who was enrolled in Grade 2 at Carlton Gardens Primary School which is located at the heart of Melbourne City in Australia (see Cahyono, 2003). In order to provide a general view of Aida’s early literacy learning, this article will first present the results of the previous study briefly.

THE FIRST STUDY

The study reported earlier (see Cahyono, 2003) examined English language learning activities in Aida’s mainstream classroom and her early ESL literacy development within a period of 9 months. Aida was nearly 8 years old when she started her Grade 2 education in Australia. Before she went to Australia, she took a private English course twice a week in Malang, her home town in Indonesia. The course was intended to introduce her to the English language and to make her like it, not necessarily to learn it at a more serious level. Thus, before enrolling into the Australian primary school, she understood only little English, but her motivation to learn English was high.

The longitudinal case study used a number of data collection methods: observation, documentary study, and interviews. Observation was conducted in Aida’s classroom to see the literacy learning environment. Documents which included portfolios and school reports were examined to get an understanding of day-to-day and periodical literacy learning and its evaluation. Interviews were held personally with Aida’s classroom teacher, Ms. Diane Ortisi, to get a general impression of

her performance and with Aida to know what she thought about her literacy learning, especially reading and writing.

The study showed that Aida's classroom environment was rich in items and materials for literacy development (e.g., posters, stories on walls, shelves full of books and children's literature). Reading activities, which included classroom reading, home reading which involved parents' supports, and summarizing from reading materials encouraged her to read various stories, fairy tales, fables and other children's literature and to write summaries of books she had read. Writing activities which included handwriting, spelling exercises, diary writing, and story writing enabled her to hand-write clearly, write most of the words correctly, describe her weekly activities, and produce her own creative stories.

To conclude, the results of the first study showed that Aida was successful in learning early ESL literacy in the Australian mainstream classroom. Various factors such as the Victorian government literacy policies, learning environment, and teachers' role and parental supports were found to have contributed to the successful basic ESL literacy learning.

THE SECOND (PRESENT) STUDY

In order to investigate Aida's ESL literacy development after a three-year immersion in the Australian mainstream classroom, a second study was conducted and reported in the present article. When this study was conducted, Aida was in Grade 5 and had already received her first semester school reports. She was now then 11 years old and, like in her first year in the mainstream classroom, she demonstrated high motivation in learning all subjects at school. She actively took part in various school activities (e.g., weekly assembly, cultural school events, and camps) and was appointed a member of the school council. These activities enabled her to interact with classmates, schoolmates, and teachers. At home, Aida mostly spoke English with her brother and Indonesian with her parents.

METHODOLOGY

This study was an ex-post facto study involving data collection conducted at a particular time. It was also a case study because it examined a case in a particular context by describing aspects of situations concerning the case (Johnson, 1992, p. 76). The case study is one of

research approaches which is useful in the area of second language learning (Cahyono, 2002).

The data for this study were mainly collected from documents such as portfolios and school reports. Aida's portfolios consisted of several types of workbooks: spelling, literacy, creative writing, literature, writing drafts, and journal writing. This study used the school reports that Aida had recently received when the study was conducted, i.e., Semester 1, 2005 (the academic year starts in January and ends in December). In addition to documents, Aida's self-assessment paper was also examined to see what she was good and not good at. An interview with Aida's teacher, Ms. Lyn Novak, was conducted in order to know the teacher's general impression of Aida's learning achievement.

It should be noted that since data were collected at a particular time (in the third year), data regarding how Aida developed her literacy learning were beyond the boundary of this study. However, in order to provide an idea of whether or not the development process went on favorably, the results of the first study were referred to when discussing and interpreting the results of the present study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study are presented in accordance with the analysis of the types of data regarding literacy learning, more particularly reading and writing. Analysis of the documents, which are presented as original in this article, indicated that, in the area of reading, Aida read texts of various genres (e.g., fiction, non-fiction, and adventures). The list of the titles of reading materials that she recorded in her "My Reading Log" paper includes *Two Weeks with the Queen* (a fiction written by Morris Glietzman), *Three Bears* (a non-fiction written by Keith Pigdon), and *Harry: The Poisonous Centipede's Big Adventure* (an adventure written by Lynne Reid Banks). The reading log also shows six other titles of books that Aida has read.

In addition to reading activities, Aida was assigned to make a report regarding what she has read in the form of a "book review". For example, when reviewing a narrative, she was asked to write the book identity (e.g., title of book, author, illustrator, and publisher), the components of the story (e.g., main character, other characters, setting, and plot), and her comments on the story. The teacher provided a special book review

format where Aida could write her book review. In order for us to know how she did it, one of her narrative book reviews is shown in Figure 1.

Title of book : Kallie and the Fishermen
Author : Sally Odgers
Illustrator : Pat Reynolds
Publisher : Barrie Publishing/Macmillian Education Australia
The main character : Kallie the Wizard's apprentice
Other characters: Kandos the Fisherman, Bruni & Tal, Kandos' neighbours, messenger gull, Wizard of the Wizard's Leap, the wizard's dragon, and Kikn
Where was the story set: The story was set in the Wizard's Leap, Shark Island, Dragon's hair and Kallie's room in the Wizard's Leap.
In what period in time did the story take place? The whole story took 2 nights and 2 days and it took place in the Wizard's Leap and Shark Island.
What do you think was the most important plot or problem in the story? Kallie is the Wizard's apprentice in the Wizard's leap. She had to leave her dad, Kandos who lived in Shark Island. One day, Kandos needed help from Kallie because he couldn't do all his work by himself. Kandos' friends Bruni and Tal, knew that Kandos needed his daughter, but they think that Kandos' daughter and himself is mad for thinking that there was such thing as magic.
How did the story end? (Relate this to the plot above.) There was a thick mist one morning in Shark Island. No fishermen could fish for supper. Kallie picked up her wand and her cloak and said, "To raise the breze in the morning". Then suddenly the mist disappeared. Bruni & Tal finally believed that there were such thing as magic.
Write your own comment about this story. It was alright. It would've been better if they had put more details of the story.

Figure 1. Aida's review of a narrative book

As shown in the book review, Aida completed the book review format with some important information regarding the book. Of particular interest is that she mentioned almost all of the characters of the story. However, when describing the plot and how the story ended, she limited

herself to mentioning the main character (i.e., Kallie), some of the supporting characters (i.e., Kallie's dad, Kandos, and his friends Bruni and Tal), and the climax in the story (i.e., Kando asked Kallie's help, yet Kandos' friends did not think that there was such a thing as magic). A possible explanation is that in her analysis Aida needed to focus on the characters that effectively built the plot of the story and resolution to the conflict due to space limitation in the book review format. It is clear that Aida successfully conveyed the resolution of the conflict (i.e., Kallie helped his dad, and Kando's friends believed that there was such a thing as magic).

Aida's skills in reading ESL texts seemed to be formed from her various reading activities she had conducted since she was in Grade 2 which included book reading, home reading, and summarizing from reading (Cahyono, 2003, pp. 226-229). For example, students in Aida's class were given an opportunity to have "silent reading" where they could read books of their own choice. In terms of home reading, parents were informed that children would bring home books of different kinds and that children could choose their own books or, occasionally, the teacher chose the books for children. Parents were advised to accompany their child at the time he/she was reading the book and to read for their child when he/she did not feel like reading on his/her own. Also, parents were reminded that the home reading aimed to encourage children to take an interest in books and to "develop a desire to read without being forced" (Ortisi, 2002, p. 2). Students were also assigned to make a summary from the books they read. Stated briefly, different kinds of reading activities which had been given to Aida since she was in Grade 2 have improved her ability in reading and analyzing ESL texts.

In terms of writing, Aida has successfully produced various written works such as creative stories. One of her creative stories is shown in Figure 2.

The success of Aida's writing of a horror story as shown above was evident from the setting which involves an uncomfortable place ("wet train station"), unfavorable time ("Friday the 13th", "at 11.55 pm"), and terrible weather ("raining really wildly"). That the character of the story was described as "puffed up" or exhausted makes the setting even worse. Suspense was built with the presence of "a man, dressed in black" that followed her, disappeared, and then reappeared suddenly to eventually stab the character. Although the climax was solved by telling that "it was

all a dream”, further suspense was built when the character woke up from her falling asleep on one of the station seats and saw “a man dressed in black”. A series of questions could appear in the mind of the reader of the story, such as: Will the man run after the character? Does he bring a knife with him? If so, does he have a plan to stab the character like what happened in the dream? Interestingly, the reader is left on his or her own to answer all of these questions and to determine how the story ends.

Friday, 13th of May 2005/Task Card 13. It was 11:55 pm. I just missed the train going to Melbourne. Worse, the last train ‘till another week. I’m all puffed up. I had to run down 256 stairs, because I was getting souvenirs for my friends. I was 5 minutes late, the train left at 11: 50. The weather was really bad, it’s raining really wildly. The weather forecast said that it was going to be cloudy, max 19. But they were wrong. Totally, totally wrong. So I decided that I should go back to the souvenir shop. I mean, there’s no point of me staying here, in a wet train station in Sydney. I turned towards the stairs, I wish there was a lift, or at least an escalator. I turned my body but my eyes are staring at the train tracks. When I looked at the stairs and there was a man, dressed in black with a hat covering his face. He was walking towards me, slowly. I had a feeling that he’s got a plan to follow me. I ran the opposite way of where the stairs are, towards the fences. I remembered when I was still in primary school I climbed fences. I started climbing, the man was still walking towards me. I was over the fence. I couldn’t see the man anymore. When I turned, the man was right in front of me, with a knife pointing at my eyes. He swung his hand, holding the knife ... wham. It was all a dream. I was sitting on one of the seats in Sydney’s train station. I looked at the stairs. There was a man dressed in black

Figure 2. One of Aida’s creative stories written in the third year of ESL learning

Aida’s ability to develop a fiction was likely to develop from sustained writing activities which began when she was in Grade 2. As a comparison, a story entitled “Farm’s Animals” that she wrote when she was in her early stage of ESL literacy learning is presented in the following (Cahyono, 2003, p. 232):

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Farm's Animals

Once upon a time there was a farm who have many of animals. He have ducks, horses, chickens, cows, birds, donkey, lambs, sheep and some pigs. One day he lost his pigs. He very sad because he lost all of his pigs. When he was sleep at night, he hear "Oink-oink". He looked at the window. He see his pigs and he is very happy with all his pigs. On the morning he put seeds on his gardens. He play with his animals in his garden.

Figure 3. Aida's story written in the eight month of ESL learning

Aida's creative story written in Grade 2 as shown above was much simpler compared to the story she wrote in Grade 5 in terms of lexical elements such as word number (86 compared to 276 words, respectively) and word choice, as well as narrative elements such as the plot.

Aida has also written a weekly journal. Figure 4 shows an entry in her journal.

Monday 31st January 2005

Dear Diary,

On Saturday I went to my friend's house with all of my other dancing friends to practice the dance for the 18th of February. It was mostly a free time. Some of us played Basketball. Me and three of my friends played "downball" with a bouncing ball. The boys inside played Playstation. When I came home, my family and I went shopping at Barkly Square. I bought a magazine to read today in S.Q.U.I.R.T. I was really tired when I got home. I watched Luthfi doing his project on the computer. The project was about Bionicle (his favourite kind of toys). I tried some new hair styles I got from the magazine that I've got at the same day.

I got to go to another dance lesson. It was nearly exactly the same. The teacher (the person that lives in the house that we went to), she didn't let us have a long break coz this week we're not doing any practice. The dance that we're about to do is for the Tsunami victims. They have to pay \$20 to get in. There's going to be thousands of people going to watch. The mayors going to be there too.

Figure 4. An entry in Aida's weekly journal

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The journal entry above was written on the first day of the academic semester of Grade 5 and Aida kept on writing her weekly journals throughout the semester. Each entry of her journal was commonly about what she experienced in the previous week period. Ms. Lyn Novak, her teacher, always responded to her journal and frequently asked her a question that triggered an issue which Aida could develop into another journal entry. Thus, Aida's personal experiences as well as teacher's feedback contributed to the development of ideas written in her journal entry. The ability in writing journals was also formed from Grade 2 when Aida was assigned to write a diary (see Cahyono, 2003, pp. 232-233)

It is important to note that Aida was aware of her own learning as she was able to assess her literacy learning development and see which areas she was good and not good at. This is evident from her self-assessment as shown in Figure 5.

What I have enjoyed: **In English, I particularly enjoyed writing Narrative Text and the Task Cards about them. I wrote one of my best stories with the help of Task Card 13.** I'm not such a fan of maths but I've enjoyed doing things about chance, like by doing experiments with the dice. I've enjoyed doing all the activities in arts, especially the papier mache. It was the best sculpture I've ever made. I also enjoyed netball, it's a great sport for Interschool Sports.

What I have achieved: **In English, I've improved in writing stories. I've made my stories more interesting and I've learned that just because the story is long doesn't mean that it's interesting.** In Maths, I've got better in measurements, especially in area. I've learnt how to tell how many squares in an irregular shape. I've learned a lot of things about Australia. I've also got better at construction work in art.

What I need to improve: **I need to improve on reading clearly and reading it the right volume, just enough for everyone to hear.** I need to improve in drawing 3D shapes more accurately. I also need to improve on giving my creations details and being more careful in painting. (emphasis on literacy learning added)

Figure 5. Aida's self assessment of her learning (bold words show emphasis)

It is apparent from the self-assessment that Aida was aware of her own strengths and weaknesses in learning. She admitted the success of her English literacy learning, for example, she considered that her creative story regarding “a man dressed in black” (see Figure 2) which was based on Task Card 13 to be one of her best stories as she stated, “I wrote one of my best stories with the help of Task Card 13”. However, Aida realized the areas where she had weaknesses. For example, commenting on her problem in reading aloud, she stated, “I need to improve on reading clearly and reading it the right volume, just enough for everyone to hear”.

Further examination of the documents showed that literacy learning in the classroom was assessed regularly on the basis of the students’ day-to-day performance. Ms. Lyn Novak provided feedback in Aida’s work and responded to her journal writing. Figure 6 shows an example of the teacher’s responses.

Monday 31st January 2005

... I had to go to another dance lesson. It was nearly exactly the same. The teacher (the person that lives in the house that we went to), she didn't let us have a long break coz this week we're not doing any practice. The dance that were about to do is for the Tsunami victims.

Teacher’s response:

You must really enjoy your dancing to be practicing so often! Where and when are you dancing for the Tsunami victims?

Monday 7th February 2005

Hi Lyn! We're dancing at Melbourne Town Hall in the 18th this month. ... I was thinking yesterday that I might be going to the city with my mum but instead I went to the pool with my dad. My goggles are now too small for me but I didn't care. I taught my dad how to star fish but he still can't do it (not even with a swimming board) ...

Teacher’s response:

Sounds like you had fun with your family! How is that brother of yours? Say hello to him from me!!

Figure 6. An example of teacher’s responses to student’s journal

The responses to the journal indicate that there was an interaction between the teacher and the students in general and, more particularly, between the teacher and Aida, an element which is crucial to help second language learners learn in the mainstream classroom (Tabors & Snow, 1994, p. 123).

In addition to regular classroom assessment, Ms. Lyn Novak reported the result of the mid-year assessment. In the school report (Bell, 2005), Ms. Novak wrote:

Aida is increasing the variety of texts she reads and generally self corrects when reading orally. She makes accurate inferences and predictions about the texts she reads and responds by completing book reviews and other literature activities. Her responses are becoming increasingly more detailed and sophisticated. Aida writes a sustained text with effective use of detail. She engages the reader by using humour, suspense and interesting descriptions. Aida makes few spelling errors and generally uses punctuation correctly and effectively. She makes a good effort to edit and proof read her work but sometimes experiences difficulty using correct tense and grammar. Overall an excellent semester's work Aida! (p. 2)

A personal interview with Ms. Novak confirmed her written evaluation of Aida's learning as shown in the excerpt above. In a nutshell, she stated that Aida "did a god job" throughout the semester.

The results of the study suggest that after a period of three years in learning ESL in the mainstream classroom, Aida has developed her advanced ESL literacy successfully. It is believed that there are a number of factors which contributed to Aida's success in literacy learning. These factors include, among others, the effective Australian policies in literacy learning, the conducive environment for literacy learning, and the important role of the classroom teacher. In the remainder of this section, these factors are discussed in turn and related to Aida's ESL literacy learning.

In Victoria, Australia, literacy education is carried out according to the "Early Years Literacy Program". This program requires literacy teaching and learning to be conducted effectively because of their importance in the process of literacy education (Raban & Essex, 2002, p. 218). Two important features of the program are the application of "a daily, focused two-hour literacy session" and "strategically planned

home/school partnerships” (Department of Education and Training, 2002, p. 1).

With the allocation of two hours daily, also called “two-hour literacy block”, for literacy learning, teachers can structure various literacy learning activities to meet the needs of the students. As a result, teachers can provide different reading and writing tasks and have sufficient time to assess and give feedback during the learning process. Home/school partnerships are implemented through assigning parents to be actively involved in monitoring student literacy learning. For example, they are expected to check the students’ home reading activities by filling in the home-reading log. The “Early Years Literacy Program”, which is carried out for five years from *prep* to *Year 4*, has been considered to be a successful program as it has affected the way Victorian children learn literacy (Raban & Essex, 2002, p. 228).

When Aida was in Grade 2 (the first year) in the Australian school, Aida already started to receive various literacy learning tasks. These tasks which included reading various text types and writing various forms of writing genres were provided as part of the implementation of the “Early Years Literacy Program”. Considering that this program was designed to last for five years, it seemed to be clear that the various literacy learning tasks were continuously given to her until the time she was in Grade 4.

Completing the “Early Years Literacy Program”, students continue their literacy learning under the “Middle Years” program, designed for those at years five to nine. Although this program is not specifically designed for literacy, it emphasizes literacy as “a key focus for innovation and excellence” (Hamilton, 2002, p. 1). With a theme “Making a difference”, this program aims to enhance students’ more advanced literacy skills “beyond the decoding aspect of reading” and help them develop their “self-management strategies” (Hamilton, 2002, p. 1). To this end, support is provided in the form of literacy initiative funding, teacher professional development, and research (Hamilton, 2002, p. 1). Thus, Aida’s literacy learning in the “Early Years Literacy Program” was sustained until she was in Grade 5, reflecting the uninterrupted ESL literacy learning development.

Another factor which contributed to the success in literacy learning is the conducive literacy learning environment. Reading and writing activities were mainly conducted in the classroom. The classroom not only had basic learning facilities such as desks and the blackboard, but

also wooden shelves for mini library and storage for other learning materials. The desks in the classroom were not arranged in line where all the students face forward, but arranged with clustered chairs. The students had colorful plastic containers where they could keep their notebooks, textbooks, and other learning materials. When the students began to work with their learning tasks, they could go to the wooden shelves where these containers were kept, to take their exercise books or textbooks, and return them back when they were done.

The classroom was set up to provide comforts and easy access to the literacy materials and tasks. The students were given freedom to choose where they would like to do their reading and writing tasks. They could sit or lie down on the wall-to-wall carpeted floor, on the sofas, or remain at their learning desks. The classroom fits the description of a classroom as a learning environment which applies the “language experience approach” (Wells, 1986, p. 159) and as one which has a “caring, supportive and stimulating” atmosphere (Wales, 1990, p. 171).

The most important factor was a supportive and encouraging teacher. The classroom teacher was able to translate the literacy learning policies and use the learning facilities and materials to support her students’ literacy learning. These characteristics of the teacher are evident from the way she managed the teaching and learning process, including her important roles in providing feedback for student learning. The provision of various reading and writing tasks enabled the students to have various activities and experiences which are effective to develop communication skills (Sampson, M. B., Rasinski, & Sampson M., 2003, p. 22). Furthermore, the teacher’s responses to journal writing provide an opportunity for the students to maintain communication with the teachers (Wales, 1990, p. 170). The effective role of the teacher is critical for the literacy learning of second language learners in the mainstream classroom.

Aida’s success in her ESL literacy learning in the mainstream classroom supported earlier findings reported by Platt and Troudi (1997). Platt and Troudi observed Mary, a Grebo-speaking child from Liberia, who was mainstreamed in a Grade 3 classroom at Maplecrest Primary School in the south-eastern United States. When she began to study at the school, she had limited English and almost no word attack skills. The researchers reported that Mary was able to take part actively because children in the classroom were valued for their involvement in various activities regardless of their capacity in doing the tasks. They found that a

warm and friendly environment contributed to a language minority child's success in participating in her mainstream classroom. In addition, Mary's engagement in activities was attributed to the teacher's beliefs about learning. Her teacher was aware of the importance of acculturation in language learning, the natural process of cognitive development, and the efficacy of cooperative learning.

Briefly stated, Victorian government policies on ESL literacy learning which were effectively translated into practices in the mainstream classroom provided a means, although indirectly, for successful ESL literacy learning. More importantly supportive learning environment and meaningful interaction in the mainstream classroom, as seen in Aida's case and in the case reported by Plat and Troudi (1997), help second language children develop their second language and academic learning. These findings are also similar to the research finding reported by Tabors and Snow (1994, p. 123). They state that children learning a second language in the mainstream classroom are likely to be successful when they are provided with opportunities to participate in language interactions with adults and peers.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that a second language learner can learn advanced ESL literacy in the mainstream classroom successfully. It has also shown that a second language learner's success of advanced ESL literacy learning in such a classroom was made possible by some contributing factors similar to those reported in the first study which concerned early ESL literacy development. These factors included the availability of literacy learning policies which are effective, the availability of learning materials and facilities to make up a conducive learning environment, and, more importantly, the availability of supportive teachers who are able to provide opportunities for the second language students to develop literacy learning. Unlike the first study which reported the contributing role of parents, this study did not report the role of parental support due to the learner's greater independence in the ESL literacy learning process.

It is intriguing then to ponder whether or not Indonesian students who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesian classrooms can be as successful in developing their literacy learning in EFL as Aida and

other students (as reported in and by Plat & Troudi, 1997) who learned ESL in the mainstream classroom. In light of the results of the present study, perhaps we need to ask ourselves first whether or not we have certain literacy learning policies favorable for EFL literacy learning in the Indonesian context. If not, we might start thinking of literacy learning policies which can be applied effectively.

Secondly, we should also ask whether or not we have a conducive literacy learning environment. Talking about English classrooms in Indonesia in a general way, we might be pessimistic in answering the question. However, referring to Diptoadi's (2000) description of an English classroom in Indonesia which could be transformed into a more conducive learning environment, we can have a great expectation regarding the availability of such a classroom and the success of early and advanced literacy learning of EFL.

More importantly, we should also ask ourselves whether or not we, English teachers, have been able to identify ourselves as supportive teachers. If we have not been fully supportive so far, then we might start performing our roles as supportive teachers in any way we can for the benefit of the Indonesian students' literacy learning of EFL.

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