

# The Myth of non-literate Culture: The Case of Indonesian Children

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**Setiono Sugiharto**

*The English Department, Faculty of Education  
Atma Jaya Catholic University, Jakarta, Indonesia  
Email: setiono.sugiharto@atmajaya.ac.id*

A national media in Indonesia once reported that Indonesia was among the nine nations with the highest illiteracy rates. The media further said that between 1995 and 2005 adult illiteracy rates in Indonesia hit over 90 percent. Similarly, implied in the latest report from a non-governmental organization, which offers free education for children in slum areas in Indonesia, the number of illiteracy rates among children increases every year (Sugiharto, 2010b). Also, it has been reported that Indonesian children are not keen on making reading as their habit.

Historically, the Indonesian government has taken various ways to eliminate illiteracy (see Sugiharto, 2008 a). Under the era of Soeharto, Indonesia's second president, illiteracy elimination programs were conducted both in informal and formal education sectors. In informal education, the program was locally known as a *kejar* (the abbreviation of *kelompok belajar*) or group learning. This program was proven to be successful in reducing the illiteracy rates in the country. In formal education, Soeharto, who was known for his equity in national education philosophy, built thousand of state elementary schools in remote areas in the provinces in Indonesia. In the period of 1982-1983, for example, Soeharto's government constructed 22, 600 schools and 150,00 more were built in 1993-1994.

In the post-Soeharto governments, illiteracy has become no less important issue in the national agenda. Under president Susilo Bambang Yudoyono, for example, the Indonesian Ministry of Education has vowed to reduce illiteracy rates from 10.12 per cent in 2003 to 5.0 percent in 2009 (Sugiharto, 2008 a). To help combat illiteracy (especially children

illiteracy) in the country, the present government has promoted and continues to promote the national reading campaign and the establishment of community libraries and mobile libraries known locally as *taman bacaan masyarakat* and *perpustakaan keliling*, respectively. The inclusion of the national curriculum in English teaching which emphasized the importance of reading in a foreign language can partly be attributed to the governments' efforts in promoting literacy campaign nation-wide. All of these attempts are included in the Ministry of Education's four-pronged policy, viz. preventing illiteracy among the youths, providing equal access to elementary education for adults, widening access to and improving the quality of functional literacy education, and maintaining literacy competence.

However, despite these laudable efforts, it remains controversial as to whether illiteracy rates in Indonesia have plummeted. The government's claim that the number of illiterate people (adults and children) decreases is often at odd with that of the non-governmental organizations monitoring educational activities. In fact, these organizations never acknowledge the government's claim.

I argue here that the lingering illiteracy problem (which causes people especially children to be unable to read and write) as well as problems related to children's literacy development in general has nothing to do with a cultural aspect<sup>1</sup>. I argue instead that these problems are due to severely limited access to books. In many regions in the country's provinces, many children live under poverty, and thus have little opportunities of attending schools and enjoying access to reading.

Furthermore, educational programs are not supportive in enhancing children's literacy development. I therefore propose that providing more access to libraries is the first necessary step to combat illiteracy, and that children's literacy development can be best facilitated not only by giving them access to books, but also by continuously encouraging them to do self-sponsored recreational reading or what Krashen (2004) calls "free-voluntary reading". I conclude by discussing the relationship between illiteracy and access to libraries.

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<sup>1</sup> It is generally acknowledged that Indonesian culture belongs to an oral culture rather than a literate culture.

## **The Myth of non-Literate Culture**

It is true that many children especially those living in remote areas are illiterate (unable to read and write), and that many children are not accustomed to reading activities, the reason for which will be discussed in the next section. It is also true that many children coming from middle and high income families are loath reading books<sup>2</sup>. But, all this shouldn't be hastily inferred that they belong to a non-literate culture, or that they lack a reading habit.

Sugiharto (2010a) presents the evidence buttressing the idea that Indonesian children and teenagers are indeed voracious readers, suggesting that they don't lack a reading habit. They regularly visit book-stores at weekend, enthusiastically selecting and picking up books they wish to read from the stores' book-shelves. The books they read come from a variety of genres such as fairy tales, comics, teenage novels, and a series of popular science. Furthermore, children and youngsters often flock to mobile libraries and community reading playgrounds to borrow and read books. They passionately come to these libraries because they enjoy reading in groups with their peers and sharing what they read to each other. It is also interesting to observe that while most students are not really eager in doing school reading assignments, they love killing their time during the break by doing pleasure reading (reading comics, teenage novels and magazines). University students also love reading what children normally read. When asked what they read, they are never ashamed of admitting they consume light reading instead of academic literature.

Other compelling evidence comes from individual testimonies. One of Sugiharto's (2010 c) students ascribed her English vocabulary improvement and her enthusiasm in reading more English books to her habit of reading comics like *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventure of Moby Dick*, and *Travelers on Gulliver's Island*. Her habit of reading, the student said, developed due to reading these comics.

Stoltz (2006), a student from one of junior high schools in Indonesia, provides an interesting testimony to the "power" of reading. Dubbing herself 'Potteraholic' and identifying herself as an avid reader of fanfiction, this student credited her improvement in

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<sup>2</sup> Rosita's (2007) survey on Indonesian students' habit of reading revealed that most students responded negatively when asked about their interest in reading in both Indonesian and English.

writing in English and her success in having it published (for the first time) in a prestigious English newspaper in Indonesia to her habit in reading fictions. She wrote, “I also learned to love writing through fanfiction, and because of fanfiction, I look forward to writing school essays and reports, whereas previously I loathed them” (Stoltz, 2006). Finally, once a non-native English speaking students with limited English proficiency, I must confess that my literacy improvement in both Indonesian and English is due to my obsession with ‘light’ reading likes folk tales, comics, simplified stories (horror and romance), and teen magazines.

Indonesian folk-tales written in English and graded from Beginner, Intermediate to the Advanced level were especially of high interest to me, and almost every day I would devour them as part of my out-class activities. So interesting, comprehensible and compelling were the stories depicted in these readings that when I read I found myself “lost in the book” and barely aware that I was reading in another language.

My passion in light reading still lingered when I studied at the university. Now having sufficient proficiency in English, I still remain a voracious reader. However, I don’t remain on the same diet – reading simplified children literature. Instead, I have moved beyond it. I read more demanding literature, more serious and heavier reading (Sugiharto, 2010 c, p. 422).

All this evidence suggests that everyone (children, youngsters, and adults) are basically avid readers, and that the prevailing perception that Indonesian children in particular and Indonesian people in general lack reading habit is just a sheer myth. However, it is common to hear that young children don’t like reading, often ignoring reading materials exhorted by their teachers and parents. That is, they tend to ignore books that adults and teachers think are ‘quality’ literature (Krashen and Ujiie, 2005). This, unfortunately, is often interpreted and even generalized that students lack a reading habit. The problem here, however, is not that they lack a reading habit, but they just don’t like what is offered to them.

Sugiharto (2010a) and Rosita (2011) have argued that pedagogical and literacy practices in the Indonesian context fail to play a facilitative role in assisting children to nurture their potential as readers. They fail to recognize that every child is in fact a reader. Also, schools create the false impression that reading a ‘serious’ academic genre and other demanding literature from the early years of learning offer cognitive advantages. Teachers feel obliged to compel students to finish reading textbooks as prescribed in the curriculum. In addition, parents are always apprehensive when they see their children reading books which have no direct relevance to school curriculum. The fear is that children will not receive good grades, make no school progress, and even fail in the exams if they rarely read school textbooks.

Such an apprehension is understandable because light reading such as comics, teen romances, and novels do not directly contribute to students’ academic achievements. Light reading activities, it is believed, offer no academic values and contribute little to intellectual growth. Light reading has also been accused of inhibiting students’ path to heavier reading. In short, it can disrupt children’s passion in reading academic literature.

Evidence from research on literacy however has debunked this widely-held assumption, demonstrating that light reading has a pedagogical value and determines academic success (see for example, Cho, 2005; Lee, 2005; Mason, 2006). Examining various studies on the effects of light reading on literacy development, Krashen and Ujiie (2005) have come the following conclusion: (1) light reading promotes literacy in general, and (2) light reading leads to heavier reading (i.e. it serves as a conduit for heavier reading).

Responding to the common perception that light reading is of little value for literacy development and academic achievements, Krashen (2004) presents innumerable reassuring evidence bearing testimony to its pedagogical benefit. Comic books, a specific instance of light reading, has been found to be linguistically appropriate, with the illustration in them making the text comprehensible; it has no negative effect on language development and school achievement; it serves as a conduit to heavier reading. Moreover, other examples of light reading such as teen romances and magazines have been shown to offer valuable input and motivation for doing more reading. Krashen, however, does not imply that light reading alone is adequate to attain advanced levels of development. It is however the “mediating

variable” that can accelerate literacy development. None the less, given the valuable insights generated from second language acquisition research confirming its efficacy and the insights that it “provides both the motivation for more reading and the linguistic competence that makes harder reading possible” (Krashen, 2004, p. 116), it thus seems judicious to consider it as one plausible alternative in creating children’s reading culture.

### **Considering Free Voluntary Reading as the First Step to Creating Kids’ Reading Culture**

If we are to assist our children in accelerating their literacy skill, it is important that we lower our expectations of them. As has been alluded to previously, it is well established that schools are ambitious in their efforts to equip students with literacy competence, causing students to bear an overwhelming cognitive demands. Not only does this ambition create a high-anxiety learning environment, but it is also counterproductive because it hinders children’s efforts to become autonomous language acquirers –the eventual goal of language acquisition.

Furthermore, parents, fearing that their children will fail school exams or get poor grades, exhort their children to read school textbooks (often demanding ones).. In many cases, to realize their ambition parents cajole children to read and focus more on school textbooks by offering rewards. There seems to be nothing wrong with this direct exhortation, provided that children like reading textbooks. Krashen (2004, 2007), however, cautions that direct encouragement can backfire unless the reading material is not interesting and meaningful to children. Rewards also can have long-term damaging and harmful effects. That is, by ‘bribing’ children with extrinsic rewards we divert children’s attention from the fact that reading is by itself an intrinsically pleasant activity.

The idea that reading is pleasant is no exaggeration, however. In fact, reading is an activity that children and adult resort to in order to escape the mundane daily routines. To give the evidence of the pleasure of reading, Nell (1988) provides the following testimony, which he quoted from W. Somerset Maugham:

Conversation after a time bores me, games tire me, and my own thoughts, which we are told are the unfailing resource of a sensible man, have a tendency to run dry. Then I fly to my books as the opium-smoker to his pipe...(p. 232).

Thus, if we are eager to create kid's reading culture, the first plausible step to take, in view, is to discover what books children love most and then to provide them with books that suit to their interests and needs. If necessary, we need to set an example by reading in our spare time. This can create the impression that reading is indeed a pleasant activity.

The long-term value of doing this light reading activity is encouraging, as shown by the following quote:

When *children* read for pleasure, they develop the competence to move from the beginning "ordinary conversational" level to a level where they can use the second language for more demanding purposes, such as the study of literature and business, and so on (Krashen, 2004, 146-147).

The above step is necessary because by providing children with books they love reading – books that are compelling and interesting to them – we provide them with comprehensible and meaningful input. Research has confirmed that if input is comprehensible, meaningful, and has communicative value, language acquisition is likely to take place<sup>3</sup>.

Wang and Lee (2007) points out that easy access to interesting reading materials is one of the most obvious conditions to be met if children are to develop reading habit. Other conditions include developing enthusiasm for reading and developing enough competence to start reading.

When access to interesting and comprehensible books is made possible, children are beginning to develop a feeling of familiarity with and enthusiasm for books; they will get hooked on books, become savvy in choosing what to read, and will eventually become

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<sup>3</sup> See Krashen 2003, 2004 for a comprehensive review of this research



‘a good story teller’. Research finds that children who do extensive free reading eventually choose what experts have decided are “good books”, and that they gradually expand their reading interests as they read more. Children also select their own reading which is often harder than adults assume (see Krashen, 2004).

Even without parents’ exhortation, kids are keen on picking up books and on discovering their own reading strategies. It is at this point that parents need to give them freedom to decide any books on various genres, and more importantly to encourage them to be the authority in choosing the books. The more freedom the students are given to choose light reading materials, the greater the chance they will have to improve their literacy competence (Rosita, 2011).

Another point worth remembering is that apart from easy access to books reading environments needs to be pleasant to ensure a low affective filter. Access to books, coupled with a quite, comfortable place to read, certainly can help ensure the rapid acquisition of the input. Krashen (2004) states:

In my work in language acquisition, I have concluded that we acquire language in only one way: by understanding messages, or obtaining “comprehensible input” in a low-anxiety situation (p. 37).

These entire arguments echo Krashen’s (2003, 2004) core premise undergirded his literacy theory –free voluntary reading (FVR). FVR is done voluntarily with the students’ initiatives. No books report or obligations to finish reading materials are required. Neither are students hard-pressed to fully understand the book contents so as to answer questions in the test. In essence, FVR is done for one’s pleasure, for one’s recreational purposes, and for one’s own purposes. As Rosita (2011) has argued that doing light reading arouses a child’s interest that will sustain them until they are linguistically mature enough to read more challenging or demanding academic texts. She goes on to argue that once reading habit in the first language develops, students will become avid readers. The ability in reading in the first language will facilitate the understanding of reading in the second language.



We can therefore summarize the importance of FVR for literacy pedagogy in a single sentence. Doing light reading may be insufficient for causing further literacy growth, but the habit of reading per se lingers until the reader is linguistically and cognitively mature enough to consume heavy reading materials. Light reading therefore paves the way to heavy reading. An overwhelming number of studies conducted in different contexts with different subjects and methods exist espousing the robustness of FVR<sup>4</sup>, and these studies show considerably consistent results in that FVR is a powerfully effective aid of success in making learners to be autonomous language acquirers.

### **Illiteracy and Access to Libraries**

Ceteris paribus, children who can easily get access to books are highly likely to develop literacy competence faster than those who can't. Implied in the above discussion, a rich-print environment is the first absolute condition to the creation of reading culture. Research confirms this assumption. Better access to books at home and at schools results in more reading (Krashen, 2004), and the more one reads, the better one's literacy development. Also easy access to public libraries not only increases enthusiasm for reading, but also affects how much children read.

Not all children however are lucky enough to enjoy access to books. In big cities in Indonesia where access to books (book stores, public libraries) are easy to find, the number of illiterate children tends to be lower in rates than those coming from poor regions. Similarly, children born and raised by high-income families have been flooded by books at home at early ages of learning, making them acquire their first language faster. Moreover, only children from the opulent can afford to go to and buy books from books-stores, making them read more and more. Also only these children have the privileged to attend good-quality schools which are well-equipped with classroom and school libraries. With such a privilege, children from these high-income families develop their literacy skills much earlier and faster than those coming from low-income families.

Apart from the easy access, big cities in Indonesia usually get prioritized in enjoying access to educational budgets from the central governments. For instance, the establishment

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<sup>4</sup> Again see Krashen (2003) and (2004) for a comprehensive review

of community libraries and mobile libraries –as part of government’s program to promote a reading campaign – still takes place in big cities, and has yet to reach underprivileged regions in the country. As I have argued elsewhere (Sugiharto, 2008 b), the most pressing need the government should take to prevent children and youth illiteracy is to build more community libraries in remote regions with high illiteracy rates.

While the government-sponsored program of exhorting children to read should be lauded, it has not yet been enjoyed by children living poor regions. The latest data from the Indonesian Ministry of Education Report for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report2006, Literacy for Life showed that only 5 percent of some 70,000 villages in Indonesia have community libraries with no available reports on the number of books available.

As the data was taken from 2006, it seems unfair to make a sweeping generalization that the figure remains valid today. There may be an increase in the number of libraries built in the remote regions. Yet, because there are still differing opinions (between government and non-governmental organization monitoring national education) as to whether illiteracy rates have been plummeted, it is safe to argue that the number might increase, but probably not significant.

In my view, the most realistic and viable strategic plan the Indonesian government should make to fight illiteracy is to enrich the **print environment**. That is, to provide access to community libraries equipped with compelling reading materials and with trained librarians. With the Indonesian government commitment to improving the quality of national education<sup>5</sup>, such a plan is certainly feasible.

As has been mentioned above, while more public libraries have been built, they have not yet reached the underprivileged provinces, which means that many children of poverty are denied opportunities to get access to books. The inequity of the provision of the access to books unfortunately widens the gap between literate and illiterate children in Indonesia. Those who enjoy access to books both at home and school tend read more and develop literacy competence faster, while those who don’t will remain illiterate.

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<sup>5</sup> The Indonesian government allocated 20 percent of its state budget for boosting the quality of education in Indonesia.

In his review of studies on the importance of access to libraries, Krashen (2004) emphasizes the following important points:

- . When the print environment is enriched, more reading is done. The more books children have at home, the more they read.
- . Schools and classroom equipped with better libraries encourage more reading and create children's reading culture.
- . Access to public libraries not only results in more reading, but also greatly increases enthusiasm for reading.
- . Finally, the richer the print environment, the better the literacy development.

With these insights, it becomes clear that continuous efforts to fight illiteracy and to promote reading campaigns (i.e. to create children's reading culture) will come to no avail unless children are supplied with a rich-print environment at homes, at schools and in the societies in general. Through this means, it seems enough to guarantee the establishment of children's reading culture.

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