THE ROLE OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL ENGLISH LITERACY ACTIVITIES IN PROMOTING STUDENTS' ENGLISH LITERACY

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Abstract: This paper reports on a case study of the role of out-of-school English literacy activities in promoting students' English literacy at an elementary school in Bandung. The study is an attempt to respond to controversy among decision makers about the idea of offering English at elementary schools and the reality that at the school where the research was conducted, English is fully used as a means of instruction for English, Mathematics, and Science. Considering that literacy is shaped in socio-cultural contexts, the researcher assumed that the students acquired and developed their English literacy not only at school but also outside of school. Their out-of-school English literacy activities might contribute to their English literacy development. The research aims were to investigate the students' English literacy level and to identify their out-of-school literacy activities. The theoretical framework covered the cognitive and socio-cultural theories of literacy. The research results were: 1) the majority of the fourth grade students were in early advanced and advanced levels for the aspects of reading and writing proficiency; and 2) their out-of-school English literacy activities played an important role in building their English literacy.

Keywords: literacy, cognitive and socio-cultural theories of literacy, out-of-school literacy activities

Teaching English at elementary school level in Indonesia is still controversial for several reasons (Alwasilah, 2000; 2001; Abdul-Hamid, 2002). A key reason is that English literacy is very complex to accomplish for students at elemen-

tary schools. This nature of literacy becomes a more complex issue with regard to English as a foreign language (EFL) because English literacy learning involves socio-cognitive processes. However, at the school where the research was conducted, English was fully used as a means of instruction for English, Mathematics, and Science in the fourth grade. If English was used as the means of instruction, English literacy skills became important because they were learning tools to understand the three subject matters. In other words, without having English literacy skills, the students would have difficulty in understanding the contents of the subject matters. With this in mind, the fourth grade students were assumed to have the English literacy skills, especially, reading and writing skills, needed to do academic English literacy practices.

Considering that literacy is shaped in socio-cultural contexts, the students were also assumed to acquire and develop English literacy not only at school but also outside of school because their English literacy practices were embedded in their daily lives. The students' out-of-school English literacy activities might contribute to their English literacy development. This issue was under-researched in the Indonesian context.

In this study, the researcher views literacy, defined as "the ability to read written texts and to write texts at a specified proficiency level" (Powell, 1999, p.18), from cognitive and socio-cultural approaches. Based on the cognitive approach, literacy is seen as "cognitively encoding (writing) and decoding (reading) skills" (Gillen & Hall, 2003, p. 1). Therefore, literacy is viewed as autonomous, cognitive, and individual skills and abilities (Street, 1984; Millard, 2003; Reyes et al., 2009) that can be measured by tests, and the results accurately reflect students' cognitive skills in literacy (Cook-Gumperz, 1986).

Based on the socio-cultural approach (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Johns, 1997; Street, 2001; Luke, 1994), literacy is viewed as socio-cultural practices that are put to work in institutions, such as the family, community, and school. Meaning is "a social negotiation that depends on supportive interactions and shared uses of language" (Lipson & Wixson, 2003, p. 7). Literacy practices refer to "the customary, habitual ways in which people read and write in their everyday lives" (Rodby, 1992, p. 27). The researchers of this theory assume that interactions and participation in literacy activities are important because the participation is both the product and the process of learning (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). In addition, Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1987) states that in language learning the input can be from "foreigner-talk, teacher-talk, and the speech of other second language acquirers"

(Krashen, 1987, p. 24). Therefore, according to Wenden & Rubin (1987), learning a new language (L2) is a complex process that involves constructing knowledge of the language by employing cognitive, external, and internal processes that are not easily observable. In this study, the cognitive and sociocultural theories of literacy and Krashen's Input Hypothesis are relevant. With this in mind, proficiency English tests were used to describe the fourth grade students' English literacy as individual skills and the interviews with the students and their parents were conducted to identify the students' out-of-school English literacy practices that played a role in promoting their English literacy skills. There are two views of out-of-school literacies. First, out-of-school literacies refer to any literacy practice− including school-like or school-centric literacies – occurring in contexts outside formal school settings. Second, those refer to any literacy practice that excludes school literacies from consideration (Knobel & Lankshear, 2003). In this study, out-of-school literacy activities refer to the activities of reading and writing texts in English that are and are not directly related to school assignments done outside school.

The lack of consensus among educational decision makers about offering English at elementary schools, coupled with the existence of an elementary school whose teachers fully used English as a means of instruction, and the complexity of English literacy learning with the lack of the English literacy studies addressing students' out-of-school literacy activities, culminated in a need to investigate the English literacy of the fourth grade students in this elementary school and their out-of-school English literacy activities.

In brief, the purposes of the study are to describe the fourth grade students' English literacy level based on the English Benchmark Assessments level 3 (Ventriglia, 2005), to identify the students' out-of-school English literacy activities and the media used to practice those activities, and to describe the students' reasons for engaging in their out-of-school English literacy activities.

METHOD

The research was conducted at an elementary school in Bandung in 2010. The participants consisted of twenty students of the fourth grade and their parents. The instruments used were tests, interviews, and the students' documentary materials. This was an interpretive qualitative case study comprising the characteristics of a qualitative case study as follows: 1) it answered "why" question (Yin, 1989). In this case, the research question deals with what the

students' reasons for engaging in their out-of- school English literacy activities are; 2) it investigated process rather than outcome (Merriam, 1998). By interviewing the students and their parents, the researcher could identify the students' literacy activities, the process and ways of their English learning, and their literacy materials; 3) it was a small scale case (Emilia, 2008). The single case was the fourth grade students' English literacy at an elementary school; 4) it employed multiple data collections involving multiple sources of information rich in context and analytic procedures to allow for in-depth study (Cresswell, 2005; Berg, 2004). This study employed multiple sources, comprising reading and writing tests, interviews with the students and their parents, and the students' documentary materials, so multiple data gatherings or triangulation could be used to enhance the validity of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The data were collected and analyzed as follows. First, to describe the literacy level of the students, proficiency tests focused on reading and writing abilities were conducted at the school. Based on these proficiency tests (Ventriglia, 2005), three aspects of reading were tested to measure students' reading ability; word analysis, systematic vocabulary development, and comprehension. Besides, two aspects of writing were tested to measure students' writing ability; writing application and language conventions. These tests taken from English Benchmark Assessments Level 3, specified for the third grade students in the United States, provided a flexible, complete system for assessing student progress in English proficiency in the primary level. The system is firmly based on "recognized standards developed by teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages" (Ventriglia, 2005, p. viii). The proficiency test" is universally used to measure people's ability in a language regardless of any training they may have had in that language" (Hudges, 1989, p. 9). It has the goal of seeing where learners have reached in their knowledge of the language (Gruber, 2008). For this reason, the results of the proficiency tests were also converted, analyzed, and interpreted using the system of English Benchmark Assessments Level 3 (Ventriglia, 2005). To simplify the analysis of the interviews, the results of the tests were grouped into high, middle, and low performers using quarter terms, used to show the standing of any particular score in a group of scores (Hatch & Farhady, 1982).

To ensure the validity of the tests, face validity was applied. Based on face validity, the tests were valid because "on the face of them, the tests seemed right test to measure reading and writing ability" (Hatch & Farhady, 1982, p. 252). In addition, these tests adopted from English Benchmark As-

sessments Level 3 have been standardized (Ventriglia, 2005). According to McKenna & Stahl (2009, p. 37), "a valid test is always reliable." For this reason, as standardized proficiency tests, the researcher concluded that the tests were valid and reliable. However, to make sure the reliability of the tests, the parallel test method was applied (Hatch & Farhady, 1982). The scores of the test 1 and test 2 were correlated. Based on the statistical calculation, it was found that the reliability of reading test was 76.84 %, the reliability of writing test was 79.15%, and the reliability of the whole test was 89.93%. A reliability coefficient of > .70 might be considered high for the test (Hughes: 1989). Therefore, these tests were reliable.

Second, the interview questions, adapted from Literacy Assessment (Rhodes, 1993), were adjusted to the objectives of the study. The first set of interview questions was specifically intended to identify the students' out-of-school English literacy activities, the media used, and their reasons for engaging in these activities. Some similar aspects asked to the students were also asked to the parents in a different way in the second set of interview questions. The interviews with the students were conducted at school and those with their parents were conducted in the students' houses. Third, documentary materials that the students had, such as short stories, magazines, comics, diaries, school work, their writing work, were noted or copied. They could contribute much to enrich the data.

The data from the interviews were transcribed, coded, classified, and categorized. The salient characteristics, similarities and differences among the categories were found out, compared, analyzed, and interpreted descriptively. In this study, prolonged engagement and triangulation were used to establish trustworthiness or internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Meanwhile, the detailed explanation in order to help readers understand the context, and a thick description to enable readers interested in making a transfer and to reach a conclusion were used to establish transferability (external validity). Then, to establish confirmability and dependability as the external audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the process and findings of the study were shared with experienced researchers in order to examine whether the findings, interpretations, and conclusions were supported by the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Level of the Fourth Grade Students' English Literacy

Based on the English Benchmark Assessments Level 3 (Ventriglia, 2005), the students' English proficiency, reflecting their English literacy, is categorized into beginning level, early intermediate/ intermediate levels, and early advanced/advanced levels. To clarify this explanation, the percentage of the students' English proficiency levels as a whole in Test 1 and Test 2 is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentage of Students' English Proficiency Levels

No	Level	Reading Word Analysis		Reading Voc. Dev		Reading Comp.		Writing Application		Writing Lang. Convention	
		T1	T 2	T1	T2	T 1	T 2	T1	T 2	T 1	T 2
1.	Beginning	20	10	15	5	5	-	15	15	30	5
2.	Early Intermediate	-	-	10	10	5	15	10	25	5	-
3.	Intermediate	-	-	20	15	-	-	5	-	25	-
4.	Early Advanced	-	15	20	35	25	20	60	50	25	20
5.	Advanced	80	75	35	35	65	65	10	10	15	75

Table 1 shows that ≥ 60% of the students are in early advanced and advanced levels for almost all aspects of reading and writing skills, except in vocabulary development and writing convention. However, the results of Test 2 show an improvement in both aspects. Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 at the end of this section of the article illustrate clear differences between high, middle, and low performers' English proficiency. The early advanced and advanced levels are combined into advanced level only.

The figures demonstrate that based on the system of English Benchmark Assessments Level 3, the English literacy of the majority of the fourth grade students (≥60%) are in early advanced and advanced level categories. This means that the majority of the fourth grade students had the abilities to analyze words by recognizing English phonemes, to separate words into syllables, and

to recognize groups of words that have the same root or affix in word analysis test; to match words to pictures, to read and apply knowledge of vocabulary to complete sentences, and to identify and apply social vocabulary in specific social situations in systematic vocabulary development test; to identify answers, main idea and inferences in expository text, to identify the main idea and some details, and to respond to comprehension questions about the text, to apply basic reading comprehension skills such as skimming, scanning, previewing and reviewing texts in reading comprehension test; to write simple sentences or phrases with some assistance, to write short narrative stories with some details a sequence of events, and to write a composition from a given theme writing application test; to use common language conventions in sentences, such as capitalization, to identify words spelled incorrectly, and to identify written language conventions and to use correct part of speech, including subject-verb agreement in language convention test (Ventriglia, 2005, pp. 5-19).

Next, the other 40% of the students are varied in the beginning and intermediate levels. The students, who were in early intermediate and intermediate levels, had the abilities to analyze words by recognizing English phonemes and to separate words into syllables in word analysis test; to match words to pictures, and to read and apply knowledge of vocabulary to complete sentences in systematic vocabulary development test; to identify the main idea and some details and to respond to comprehension questions about the text in reading comprehension test; to write simple sentences or phrases with some assistance and to write short narrative stories with some details a sequence of events in writing application test; to use common language conventions in sentences, such as capitalization and to identify words spelled incorrectly in language convention test (Ventriglia, 2005, pp. 5-19).

Finally, the students, who were still in the beginning level, only had the abilities to analyze words by recognizing English phonemes in word analysis test, to match words to pictures in systematic vocabulary development test, to identify the main idea and some details in reading comprehension test, to write simple sentences or phrases with some assistance in writing application test, to use common language conventions in sentences, such as capitalization in language convention test (Ventriglia, 2005, pp. 5-19). In brief, the study shows that the English literacy of the majority of the fourth grade students ($\geq$60%) was in early advanced and advanced levels for almost all aspects of reading and writing skills.

Based on literacy levels suggested by Wells (1987), the study shows that most students were already literate in English in the performative level, functional level, and information level even though the degree of their proficiency was different. It means that in the performative level, they had the ability to decode simple written messages and encode ideas into writing according to written conventions; in the functional level, they had the ability to cope with the needs of everyday life that involve written language; and in the information level, they had the ability to use English literacy skills in the acquisition of knowledge.
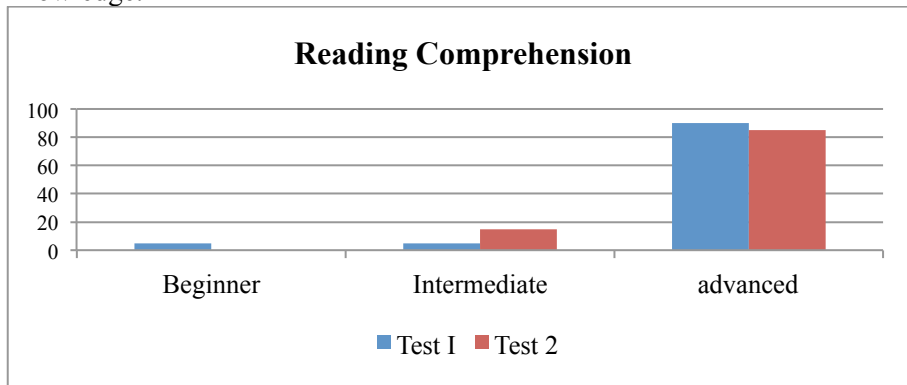
Reading Comprehension

Figure 1. Percentage of Students' English Proficiency Levels in Reading Comprehension
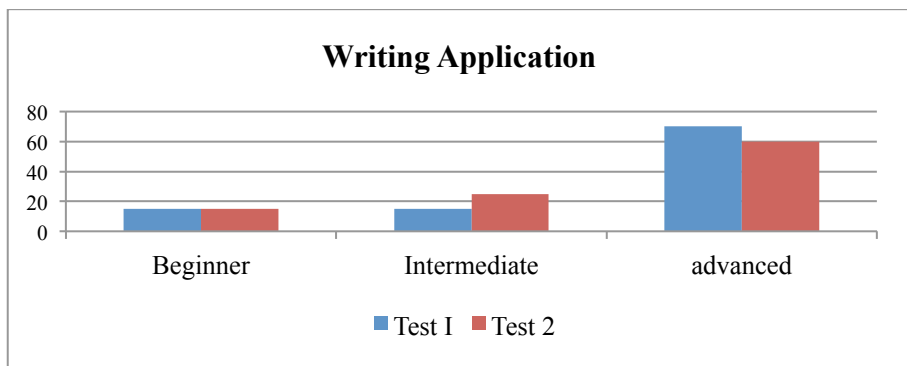
Writing Application

Figure 2. Percentage of Students' English Proficiency Levels in Writing Application
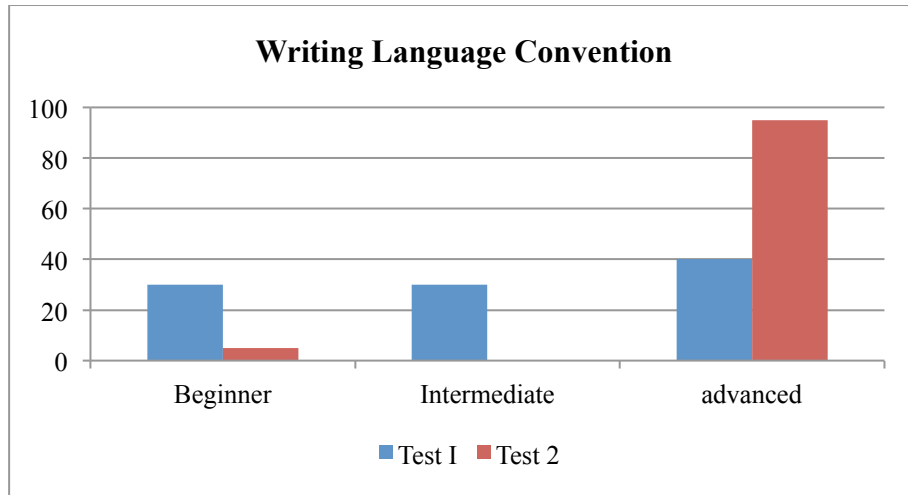
Figure 3. Percentage of Students' English Proficiency Levels in Writing Language Convention
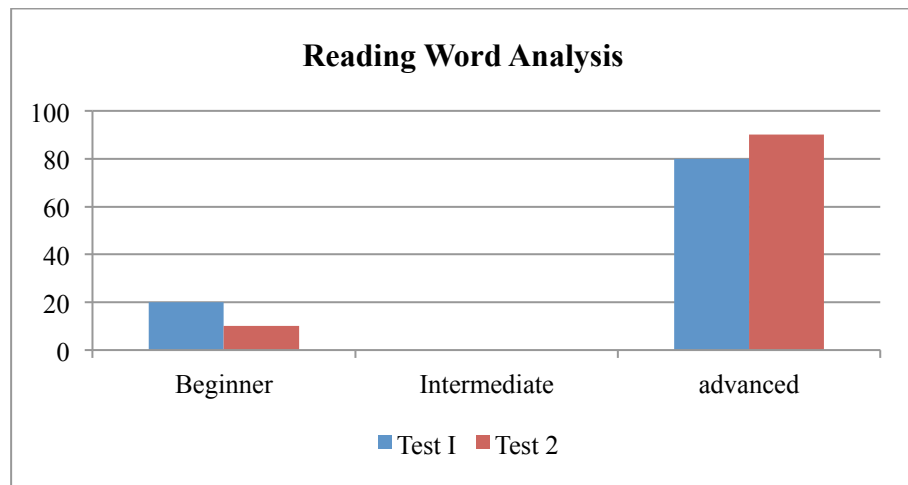

Figure 4. Percentage of Students' English Proficiency Levels in Reading Word Analysis
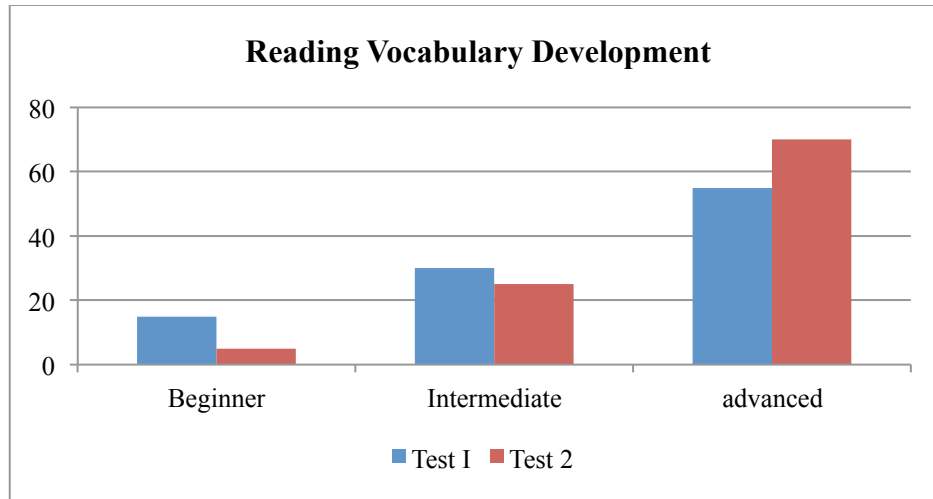
Reading Vocabulary Development

Figure 5. Percentage of Students' English Proficiency Levels in Reading Vocabulary Development

Kinds of English Literacy Engagement

This study demonstrates that the students practiced various kinds of out-of-school English literacy activities. Eighteen kinds of out-of-school English activities, commonly practiced by the students, were classified into: 1) academic English literacy activities, including school-based tasks; 2) non-academic pleasurable reading activities, including reading novels, reading story books, reading internet texts, reading magazines, reading newspaper, and reading comics; 3) non-academic pleasurable writing activities, including writing poem, writing diary or simple writing, such as a comic script, writing face book status, e-mails, and short messages, and writing a short essay; and 4) other supportive literacy activities, including playing game, listening to music, watching movies, and English speaking activities. The difference of out-of-school non-academic English literacy activities between the high, middle and low performers is in the frequency of their engagement and the number of books they have in their home.

The result of this study is in line with Hyland's research which uncovered many seen and unnoticed acts of reading and writing of the students outside

school (Hyland, 2002). However, the twenty students in this study still focused their daily activities primarily on their academic English literacy activities (100%). Most of the students were engaged in pleasurable English literacy activities, such as watching cartoon movies, reading stories, and playing games, only on the weekends when they did not do their homework.

Piaget (1970a) states that children are active learners and agents dynamically interacting with and responding to the world surrounding them, which in turn affect their cognitive development. Through taking the action to solve their problems, learning occurs. Most students are active learners interacting with their environment. They practiced their English literacy activities without being demanded by their parents.

In addition, Vygotsky (1978) explains that the literacy learning is shaped by social and cultural contexts. It is within the flow of experience of participation in society that language is internalized and understanding develops, and social interaction is important for cognitive development. Thus, learning occurs by interaction with others. Both the identity of the learners and their language knowledge, are collaboratively constructed and reconstructed in the course of interaction. In this study, most investigated students are active constructors of their own learning environment, which they shape through their choice of goals and operations. They construct and consolidate their own learning through experience, reflection, and social interactions with others. They interacted with the more knowledgeable people and sources, such as parents, tutors, and electronic media. By doing these activities, the English knowledge was constructed and internalized by the students.

Linguistic signs are created, used, borrowed, and interpreted by individuals engaged in purposeful action, and language emerges from socio-cultural activities (Kramsch, 2004). By listening to music, playing games, watching movies, reading stories, and doing light writing, the students engaged in purposeful action. In socio-cultural perspective, language learning depends not only on language as input, but also as a resource for participation in the kind of activities their everyday lives comprise. The participation in these activities is both the product and the process of learning (Zuengler & Miller, 2006).

Meaningful and comprehensible English input occurred in social interactions with the people surrounding the students both at school and at home. The input can be from "foreigner-talk, teacher-talk, and the speech of other second language acquirers" (Krashen, 1987, p. 24). The input received by some students was from their parents, movies, tutors, and tutors. Nevertheless, accord-

ing to Schultz & Fecho, (2000), out-of-school literacy activities provide supplement and support the work of the school. In brief, referring to the aforementioned theories and studies, the students' out-of-school English literacy activities contributed to promoting their English literacy.

The study uncovers six significant characteristics of the students' English literacy practices: 1) the students were engaged in more academic English literacy activities; 2) they were engaged in pleasurable light reading and writing; 3) their activities occurred in online, electronic audio visual and print environments; 4) the students practiced online English literacy activities, which blended writing and reading; 5) some students were engaged in English speaking activities; and 6) six students had extra English instruction from other sources as their efforts to improve their English. These six salient characteristics indicate that the types of English literacy activities and the boundaries of their English literacy practices are likely to be influenced by the students' linguistic, cultural, and technological backgrounds.

Media Used by the Students

The students enriched their English literacy practices by using three kinds of media (print, online, and electronic audio-visual tools). Electronic technology has influenced or shaped the nature of their English literacy practices and development. Hagood (2003) states that because new media and online literacies have become part and parcel of the day-to-day lives for many individuals, today's notions of text continually expand, extending beyond traditional print-based reading and writing. Similarly, the students in the study have become readers of not only printed texts but also online texts, just as Robinson & Verluis (1985) suggest that print-based and online literacy should be mutually complementary. In brief, the study revealed that the three kinds of media contributed to the students' English literacy.

Reasons for Engaging in Out-of-School English Literacy Activities

The study shows that the five outstanding reasons for the students' English literacy activities were to do their school assignments, to have personal enjoyment, to kill their time or to seek information, to practice their English, and to express their feelings. These findings indicate that these students developed their own ways to cope with the emotions and experiences of a child's life

through writing and reading. In this case, their out-of-school English activities played a role in serving these diverse purposes. Although the students do not realize the educational value of their out-of-school English literacy activities, according to Schultz & Fecho, (2000), out-of-school literacy activities provide supplement and support the work of the school.

In short, the study demonstrates that the students practiced different kinds of out-of-school English literacy activities with diverse purposes and media. Referring to the theories and previous studies on literacy, their activities contributed to their English literacy development. They interacted with more knowledgeable people and sources, and participated in the literacy events outside the school. In relation to the aspects distinguishing the students' English literacy development, the differences of the students' investment of time, efforts, motivation, structured study time, and goal resulted in the difference of English literacy progress between the high and low performers.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, firstly, the research shows that the majority of the fourth grade students' English literacy was in the early advanced and advanced level, measured using English Benchmark Assessment Level 3. This means that the majority of the fourth grade students had the abilities required by the system of English Benchmark Assessment Level 3 (Ventriglia, 2005). Then, based on the literacy levels suggested by Wells (1987), the majority of the students were found to be literate already in English in the performative, functional and information levels. Therefore, English was used as a means of instruction successfully in the fourth grade at this elementary school because the students' English was relatively adequate to receive the English instruction for the three subject matters.

Secondly, from the aspect of the students themselves as individual active learners and agents (Piaget, 1970a), the study demonstrates that the students practiced many out-of-school English literacy activities with diverse purposes and media, and their activities contributed to their English literacy development. Thirdly, the study revealed five outstanding reasons for their reading and writing activities: assignments, entertainment, getting occupied or seeking information, practicing English, and expressing their emotion.

Fourthly, the students enriched their out-of-school English literacy practices by using three kinds of media (print, online, and electronic audio-visual

tools). The students' English literacy practices, both in and outside the class-room, are considered as their efforts to gain English language input from and to interact with other more knowledgeable adults. Hence, the English knowledge is actively built up from within by each student as a member of a community and by a community itself. In brief, the students' out-of-school English literacy activities and home-learning facilities contributed to their English literacy development.

The findings of the study suggest the following. First, teachers should widen their understanding of English literacy, both academic English literacy and other types of English literacy practices, acknowledge the value of these types of English literacy, and take advantage of knowledge that students bring from their out-of-school English literacy activities by integrating them into their school-based English literacy experiences in the classroom. Nocon & Cole (2009, p. 15) state, "Diverse linguistic-cultural experiences and learning from the home are valuable resources for effective classroom teaching and learning." Teachers can increase their efforts to understand "students' funds of knowledge" (Edwards, et al.*,* 2009, p. 87*)*. By doing this, academic English literacy acquisition may well be enhanced if teachers can find and establish a connecting point between academic and non-academic English literacy activities that can support and supplement each other.

Second, there is a need to consider educational, meaningful, pleasurable out-of-school English literacy activities for Indonesian students beyond school-based tasks which can improve their English literacy experiences, especially for those at elementary schools because the two are mutually supportive of English literacy. According to Curtain & Pesola (1988, p. 138), "Children will comprehend more easily what has meaning and interest for them, and learn to read more quickly and easily when there is a reason for doing so." Third, lack of availability of reading materials written in English for children is another reason for students not to engage in sufficient out-of-school reading. This study suggests that this constitute a challenge for teachers, authors, and researchers to create handbooks for elementary schools and pleasurable books for children adjusted to Indonesian cultures that can improve students' English literacy naturally.

In brief**,** the findings of the study are expected to contribute to the English teaching profession at elementary schools in particular and English literacy education in Indonesia in general.

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