INDONESIAN EDUCATION, PISA SCORES AND 3 READING STRATEGIES THAT WORK

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Abstract

This presentation introduces me and my engagement with Indonesian contexts of teaching and learning. I then introduce the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) "Programme for International Student Assessment" (PISA), noting the challenges facing Indonesia in this period of reform. Publically acknowledging the challenges is an important step in narrowing the agenda and effecting positive future changes. Based on this information from the PISA data, I introduce three effective reading strategies that can be used in all years of schooling: (i) summarising non-literary texts to get the main detail; (ii) reading figurative language in literary texts; and (iii) actively reading to make meaning from the unwritten ellipses.

Introduction

I write this paper as a Literacy educator, teacher educator and researcher from Australia. I've been a classroom teacher for a decade. I have taught English to first language speakers and second language speakers. I love reading and writing, which I think is important for a reading and writing teacher. I have also been a teacher educator, researcher and doctoral supervisor for 15 years at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia. I specialise in English Curriculum and Literacy Education. I have a special interest in teaching in cross cultural contexts. I am privileged to work with a talented group of international scholars. One of these scholars was from Indonesia, Dr Uswatun Qoyyimah. Dr Qoyyimah (2015) wrote an award winning PhD thesis on moral curriculum reform in Indonesia. Through the process of supervising Dr Qoyyimah's thesis, I very much enjoyed being re-

acquainted with education in Indonesia. I was reminded about the friendliness and generosity of Indonesian people. I'll talk more about friendliness later, as this idea comes up in the PISA data for Indonesia.

Indonesia was the site of my 2005 Doctoral Thesis. In this work I examined teachers' content knowledge for teaching English to Indonesian adults and secondary school students (Exley, 2001a,b, 2003, 2004, 2005a,b). I compared and contrasted two groups of teachers/students across two sites of teaching and learnings. The first case study was about adult learners in a major city in Central Java who were being taught by a range of Indonesian and international teachers. The second case study was about youth from a regional village in Central Java who were taught English by Australian guest teachers. A comparison and contrast study is useful for the way it confirms the problems of generalising about a nation's teaching and student outcomes on the basis of one group of teachers/students in one context of teaching and learning. The specifics of each context should be taken into account. I'd like to talk a little more about the findings of my doctoral dissertation if I may. Doing so gives us an important background for understanding Indonesia's performance in the 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA) and the teaching of reading, not only as literature, but also as information text.

Research into Language and Literacy Education in Indonesia

At the outset, all of the teachers in my study spoke about the friendliness of the students and teachers alike. The data from my two case studies also showed that all the teachers had similar understandings about the learning attributes of the Indonesian students. Teachers from both case studies reported that the 'typical' strategies used by Indonesian National teachers and the teaching environment encouraged Indonesian students to be passive, shy, quiet, mindful of their place within patriarchal hierarchies, and rote learners (Exley, 2005a,b). For example, both case studies

revealed how the Javanese term *kasar*, the *Pancasila*, large teacher-student ratios, confined physical space, and the limited availability of resources affected the students' learning behaviours (Exley, 2005a,b).

However, very importantly, examples were also given to show that when circumstances permitted, Indonesian students were also other than passive, shy and quiet and were not always restricted by patriarchal hierarchies. Teachers from both case studies declared that Indonesian people could be critical thinkers (Exley, 2005a,b). However, some of the teachers suggested that Indonesian people could not be overtly critical of government policies because of the strict control measures introduced by the state that socialised people to believe that it was disloyal and unpatriotic to criticise Indonesia (see also Qoyyimah, 2016).

Indonesian teachers seem to have a strong desire to create critical literacy skills in their student cohort. The teachers explained how they asked students to read criticisms of other countries' policies and then asked the students to criticise the policies of these other governments. At a higher level, the teachers also encouraged the students to apply these critical review skills to their own academic work (Exley, 2005b). These examples show the creativity of the Indonesian teachers as well as their commitment to scaffolding students' critical literacy practices.

The Australian guest teachers who were working with Indonesia youth in secondary schools said they provided a range of strategies that included discussing imaginary problems, role playing, researching sensitive topics, developing group work skills, undertaking critical reading exercises, simulations, and coaching on appropriate ways to withdraw from discussions on sensitive issues. The Australian guest teachers also provided demonstrations, carefully structured the Indonesian students' responses, used humour, re-structured the way the teaching space was utilised, connected with students' interests by playing pop music, and played games. In terms of evaluation,

the Australian guest teachers also focused more on what the students could do, rather than marking students on what they could not do. These teachers said that such teaching practices required a lot of work, substantial time for planning, and a reduced teacher/student ratio (Exley, 2005b). It's little wonder good teachers are utterly exhausted.

Despite all the Heads of Schools and Heads of Departments being happy with the teaching strategies of the Australian guest teachers, something interesting happened in the lead up to exams. Here is an excerpt from my thesis (Exley, 2005b, p. 255):

> *December he was taken off his teaching duties with the third years because they were going to have their big external exams in June. Although he said that his Head of Department would not have put it like this, his candid interpretation of the decision was that he may have been seen to be wasting the students' time.*

This statement is important for the way it talks about literacy, literacy learning and literacy assessment. I think there's a point of conversation for educational bureaucrats, school administration and teachers alike. What gets valued in the Indonesian education system? What gets shut out of the Indonesian education system?

Indonesia is, of course, not alone with this dilemma. You might know that from 2008 Australia introduced a high stakes national assessment for literacy and numeracy. This program, called NAPLAN, has had a negative effect on the teaching of critical literacy and critical reading and writing practices in Australian junior and secondary schools. The assessment plan only targets rudimentary literacy and numeracy skills so the teaching of critical literacy and critical reading and writing practices has been side-lined in some schools. The impact is more pronounced for the group of students

who are deemed 'at-risk' of not being successful in education. These students tend to be those who speak another language or come from a minority culture or are from low socio-economic areas as well as those from geographically isolated locations. For these students, the futures driven curriculum is set aside and more teaching and learning time is devoted to practising for the national assessment. I would argue that these are the students who need carefully scaffolded and highly effective critical literacy and critical reading and writing practices. It's a social justice issue when the students who are most at-risk only get access to a rudimentary literacy program, denied of high quality instruction in critical literacy, critical reading and critical writing.

Programme for International Student Assessment

Indonesia, like Australia, is very interested in the PISA rankings. PISA is the 'Programme for International Student Assessment' and is administered by the global consortium of the 'Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development' (see https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/). The PISA website states:

> *The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. To date, students representing more than 70 economies have participated in the assessment.*

Indonesia is a non-member country, and has participated in PISA every three years since 2000. Comparative data of the longitudinal kind is useful for identifying trends and the impact of various reforms. I don't wish to compare Australia and Indonesia specifically. Such an exercise is not useful for our discussion today. Moreover, both countries have their own contexts that need to be considered and the statistics conceal this complexity.

One statistic that warrants attention is that Indonesia has the second highest percentage of 25-34 year olds who have not completed upper secondary education (OECD, 2015). The graph indicates that approximately 60% of Indonesian young adults have not completed upper secondary education (OECD, 2015, p. 30). The country with the highest percentage of 25-34 year olds who have not completed upper secondary education is China. China is currently undergoing a significant education reform. For example, from 2000 to 2010,China shifted her scores from 94% to 64% (OECD, 2015, p. 32). I've recently been working in China over the last two years. I am confident that China will improve her score even further in the years ahead. This leaves Indonesia with lot to think about.

Why does this statistic matter? The 2015 OECD report explains that this statistic is part of the measure of human capital within a country. This indicator provides a measure of the types of knowledge and skills held by society generally as well as a sense of how important tertiary education is for the population. This measure also points to the earnings advantage and health advantage when individuals within a country attain tertiary education. This measure also indicates other social outcome advantages such as an increase in volunteerism, an increase in trust and an increase in having a say in government (OECD, 2015).

The data from PISA 2012 reading, mathematics and science is available. Although 2015 assessments have been undertaken, the formal results are not yet available. The 2012 data show the following information for Indonesian student performance in the area of reading, mathematics and science (see http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=IDN&treshold=10&topic=PI).

- *In Indonesia, the average performance in reading of 15-year-olds is 396 points, compared to an average of 496 points in OECD countries.*
- *On average, 15-year-olds score 375 points in mathematics, the main topic of PISA 2012, compared to an average of 494 points in OECD countries.*
- *In science literacy, 15-year-olds in Indonesia score 382 points compared to an average of 501 points in OECD countries.*

The results are low. There is much work to be done to give Indonesian students a solid chance in 2020 and beyond.

An important statistic that is missing from this list is that Indonesia is making great gains in terms of equity (OECD, 2015, p. 13). Indonesia actually outstrips Australia in terms of improving equity outcomes for students. This is no small feat; equity outcomes remain a source of much debate in Australia, as it should. Admirably, Indonesian students report an extremely strong sense of belonging. Ninety-six percent of participating students agreed that they 'made friends easily at school' and agreed that they 'felt happy at school' (OECD, 2014, p. 20). These indicators matter and it's a credit to the nation that so many students report so positively on their sense of self and sense of well-being. In fact, Indonesian students are the happiest students in the world (OECD, 2014, p. 21). Many nations will be looking to Indonesia to see what it is you do to have such friendly and happy students.

PISA Reading Results - 2009

So let's return to the PISA results. To be clear, PISA is not directly linked to the school curriculum. The two hour tests are designed to assess to what extent students at the end of compulsory education, can apply their knowledge to real-life situations

and be equipped for full participation in society. Students from each country take different combinations of different tests.

The 2012 PISA tests were focused on mathematics. I'd like to recall the data from PISA 2009 which focused on the teaching of reading. There's some celebratory news and some sobering news. The celebratory part is that when compared to the 2000 PISA reading test, Indonesia made great gains (2010, p. 33). In terms of improving scores, Indonesia is the 4th highest ranked nation in the world. You obviously know how to make a positive change. It seems a lot of this positive difference is to do with a change in the number of students who are now reading for enjoyment (OECD, 2010, p.75). Great work once again to the policy makers, teachers and communities of Indonesia. This focus is important because students who enjoy reading are more likely to be better readers. I'm going to stress the term 'more likely', because interestingly, this isn't the case in Indonesia (OECD, 2010, p. 67). The sobering part is that Indonesian students from villages, cities and large cities are still under-performing on all measures of reading despite saying that they like to read for enjoyment.

So what kind of reading is associated with being a good reader? In most countries, students who read fiction for enjoyment were much more likely to be good readers (OECD, 2010, p. 68). Students who read newspapers, magazines and nonfiction were also better readers in many countries, although the effect on reading performance was not as pronounced. This is a really important point if we think about the advent of the internet and the ease of access that many youth have to the internet. I'm also very conscious of the digital divide and the large number of students who have no or limited access to the internet. The point I want to make is that the internet gives our young people reason to read more often, but that reading is destined to be (a) non-literary, (b) unsustained, and (c) not of the disciplinary fields that is rewarded in schooling. This doesn't mean the internet is not good; it means we need to also

actively promote the reading of sustained literary experiences as well as sustained non-literacy experiences from the disciplinary fields that are the goals of education.

The OECD (2010) report also provided some advice on what learning strategies help students perform better in reading. The OECD 2010 (p. 72) report advises:

- *Students who know how best to summarise information that they read can perform much harder reading tasks, on average, than those who do not.*
- *Students also perform better when they know which strategies help them to understand and remember information, and by adopting strategies to guide their own learning.*
- *Having a deep understanding of reading strategies, and using those strategies, are even stronger predictors of reading performance than whether students read widely for pleasure.*

I would now like to introduce three reading strategies that can be applied in all year levels.

Reading Strategy 1: Summarising Information in Non-Literary Texts

This first reading strategy is learning how to summarise information in non-literary texts. Take the following sentence on the science topic of coastal rock formations.

Science Topic: Coastal Rock Formations

The bedrock into which our coast is carved from approximately the end of Almar St (West Cliff) and Ano Nuevo is a sedimentary formation known as the Santa Cruz Mudstone.

Grammatically speaking, this is a simple sentence. But it contains a number of complicated grammatical elements that need to be understood. It is a single clause because there is only one event or one happening, represented by the main verb. But a novice reader will also erroneously see 'carved' as the verb (happening). It is useful if students are taught that information texts often use relational verbs. Relational verbs set up relationships between concepts, or things. In this case, the relational verb is 'is'. Another complexity is that this sentence carries two words 'is'. The first 'is' is contained within the group 'is carved' but the carving is not the main activity of this sentence. The reference to 'is carved' is just telling us about the bedrock, not an event about carving. We need to teach students to look for the main verb of the clause. In this case the main verb is the 'is' (sitting between 'Neuvo' and 'a sedimentary'). Once we find the main verb and we identify it as a relational verb, we know we are looking for two concepts of things. These concepts or things typically are placed either side of the verb. The first concept, or thing, is a long noun group: 'The bedrock into which our coast is carved from approximately the end of Almar St (West Cliff) and Ano Nuevo'. The second concept, or thing, is another long noun group: 'a sedimentary formation known as the Santa Cruz Mudstone'. Each of these long noun groups have a head noun as identified below in bold:

- **First noun group: The bedrock into which our coast is carved from approximately the end of Almar St (West Cliff) and Ano Nuevo**
- **Second noun group: a sedimentary formation known as the Santa Cruz Mudstone**

Everything else in the first noun group provides information about the head noun, that is about which bedrock. Everything else in the second noun group provides information about the head noun, that is about the formation. We come to learn that it

is a sedimentary formation and we learn its other name. It's important that we know what job, or what other meaning, this other information brings to the sentence.

When we return to the original sentence and highlight the relational verb (is) and the two head nouns (bedrock and formation) we have summarised the sentence.

[The bedrock] into which our coast is carved from approximately the end of Almar St (West Cliff) and Ano Nuevo **is [a** sedimentary **formation]** known as the Santa Cruz Mudstone.

The summary of this sentence is 'the bedrock is a sedimentary formation'. Summarising builds readers' expertise with extracting meaning from dense text. Such a skill is very useful for reading science, geography, history and mathematics texts. I urge all science, geography, history and mathematics teachers to teach summarising as part of their class lessons. This is how science, geography, history and mathematics teachers can help all students with the reading task.

Reading Strategy Two: Knowing How Figurative Language Works

Well written literary texts use a range of literary devices, including figurate language. Figurative language is a useful strategy for explaining events or objects in a narrative, especially if the events or objects are routine, mundane or uninteresting. Seemingly simple narratives about everyday events and objects use literary devices. Literary devices bring pleasure to the reading experience as new ways of seeing or appreciating the event or object are offered by the author to the reader. The range of figurate devices used in English is quite wide. Many seem similar, but in reality they each have points of difference. My friend and colleague, Associate Professor Lisa Kervin (see Exley & Kervin, 2013, p. 93), prepared this chart to help readers know

about the literary devices of similes, metaphors, personification, hyperboles and understatements. I acknowledge the artwork by my friend and colleague, Karen Argus from Cairns in Australia.
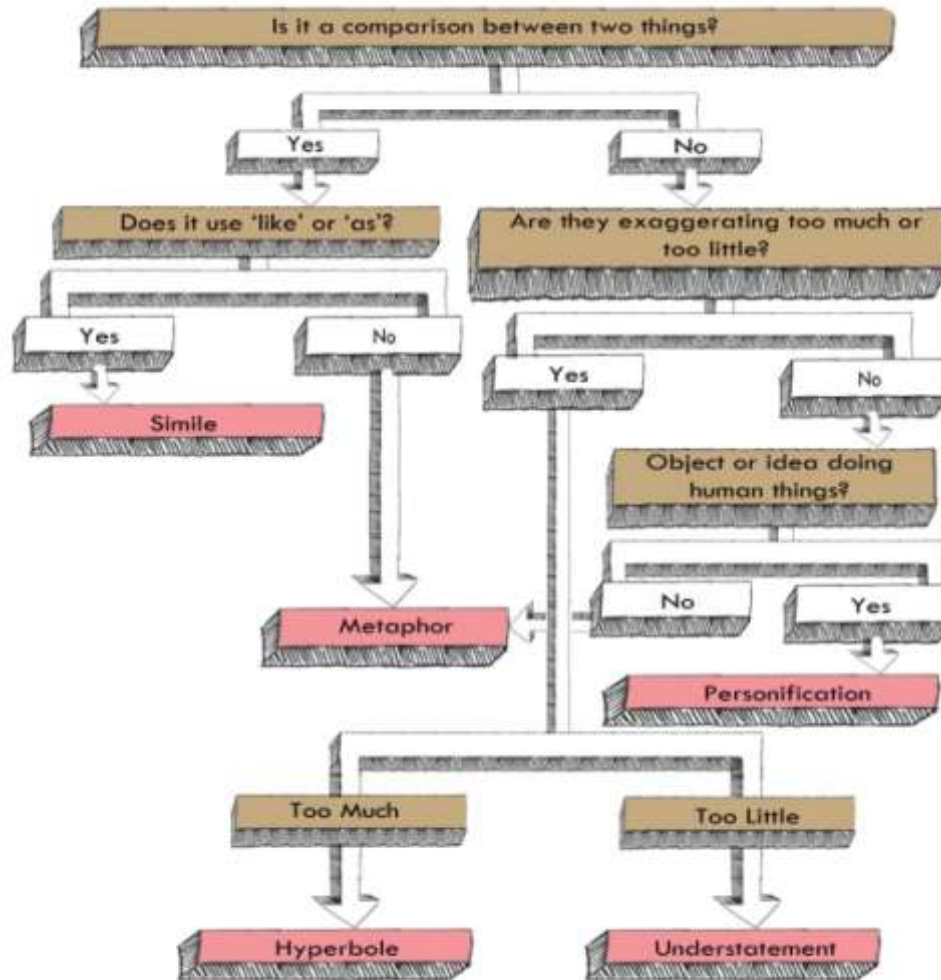
Source: Exley & Kervin (2013, p. 93)

By way of example, Lisa suggests using a beautiful children's picture book called 'The Black Book of Colours' by Menena Cottin and Rosana Faria (2008). This book is like no other. The illustrations are raised black lines printed on black glossy paper.

I'll circulate some copies of this text so you know what I'm talking about. In this book, the author tries to explain colour to a blind child. Two pages are noted below:

- **Brown crunches under his feet like autumn leaves.**
- **But when the clouds decide to gather up and the rain pours down, then the sky is white.**

Source: Cottin, M. & Faria R. (2008). The Black Book of Colours. UK: Walker Books.

Using the questions in the flow chart, I consider the first line 'Brown crunches under his feet like autumn leaves'. I identify this sentence as a comparison. Two things are being compared: the colour brown and crunched autumn leaves. I follow the 'yes' arrow to the next question. I ask myself, 'Does it use like or as?'. The answer is 'yes' this comparison uses 'like'. We find out that this figurative device is a 'simile'.

Using the questions on the flow chart, I consider the second line 'But when the clouds decide to gather up and the rain pours down, then the sky is white'. This one is a little more complex, so I'm just going to focus on the part that talks about the 'clouds deciding'. I identify that it is not a comparison. I follow the 'no' arrow to the next question. I ask myself 'Are they exaggerating too much or too little?'. The answer is 'no'. I follow the 'no' arrow to the next question 'Object or idea doing human things?'. The answer is 'yes', the clouds did something human, they made a decision. We find out that this figurative device is an example of personification.

Once students know how to recognise and read figurative language, they are able to derive more pleasure from the reading experience. Put simply, things make more sense. Students who have a heightened sense of figurative language can start to use

figurative language in their own writing as well. The pleasure they have with reading can be extended to their pleasure with writing.

Reading Strategy Three: Reading with Ellipses

The third readings strategy I would like to introduce is reading with ellipses. Let's look at a very popular book for young children called 'An Odd Egg' by Emily Gravett (2009). It's a delightful story about a male duck who finds an egg and sits with the egg, hoping it will hatch. I won't spoil the ending for you. Let's read the book together.

The book has only ten sentences, but not all sentences are properly formed sentences. Let's look at the ten sentences again.

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1. All the birds had laid an egg.
2. All except Duck.
3. Then duck found an egg!
4. He thought it was the most beautiful egg in the whole wide world.
5. But the other birds did not.
6. All the eggs had hatched.
7. All except for Duck's.
8.
9. Duck waited for his egg to hatch.
10. He waited…and waited…and waited.
11. Until

Source: Gravett, E. (2009). *An Odd Egg***. London: MacMillan Children's Books.**

This book has all the hallmarks of a seemingly simple text .There's not a lot of words on the page. The complexity is that some sentences are complete in and or themselves, Other sentences have crucial elements missing. The reader is forced to fill in, or complete, the missing elements. These gaps, or missing elements are called ellipses. Let's look at sentence 2 as an example:

2. All except Duck.

Source: Gravett, E. (2009). *An Odd Egg*. London: MacMillan Children's Books.

'All except Duck' does not make sense on its own. This sentence has no verb, so we don't know what's happening. As readers, we have to fill in the ellipsed element. I suggest the sentence should be 'All except Duck ***had laid an egg'***. I used my understanding of sentence 1 to complete the ellipsed element of sentence 2. A number of other sentences need to be completed and it is up to the reader to make this link. I've added what I would put into the ellipsed sentences in the box below . The underlined italics are my ideas for making meaning of the sentences.

2. All except Duck ***had laid an egg***.

5. But the other birds did not ***think // it was the most beautiful egg in the whole wide world***.

7. All except for Duck's ***egg had hatched***.

9. He waited…and ***he*** waited…and ***he*** waited.

I realise I've used some short children's books today. Narratives for older students also use ellipses. Help students develop a keen eye for ellipses. If they are more aware of this need to be actively involved in the reading process, they will come to

enjoy their experiences with literature. They will relish the opportunity to be the reader that works with the author and the text to make a higher level of meaning.

Conclusion

Thank you for your time today and for allowing me to talk about the PISA data. I hope the three reading strategies give you some guides for the important role of the teacher in scaffolding students to summarise non-literary texts, engage with figurate language and actively read around the text to make meaning of sentences with missing elements. I wish you well in your ongoing journey. It is my hope that Indonesian students continue to be the happiest students on the planet in this new era of curriculum reform. If you can achieve both, you will have achieved something no other country has achieved.

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