

Learners’ models enhance the development of learners’ reading and thinking strategies

Joyce Merawati

Politeknik Negeri Bandung

email: joyce.merawati@polban.ac.id

Abstract – This study was conducted to find the efficient way to teach academic reading skills to non-English department students at tertiary education. Based on the previous study, it was found that the students found difficulty in reading academic texts because of their limited vocabulary. Reading experts state that “good readers are good guessers” (Nation, 2002). Further, He claims that the strategies of guessing meaning from context is important strategy in reading. Considering these statements, this study investigated reading class by teaching the strategies of guessing meaning from context. Since this study was conducted to solve the students’ perceived problem when reading academic texts, it applied three-cycle qualitative inductive action research together with the students. These three cycles were: Cycle 1, the lecturer provided individual model of strategies, namely identifying parts of speech, finding clues from contexts, and identifying word parts; Cycle 2, the lecturer showed various models and gave practices; and Cycle 3, some selected students demonstrated their models to the class. Throughout this study, the students were encouraged to write journals explaining the strategies applied when they were guessing the meanings of words. The data was analyzed from the students’ journals collected at the end of each cycle. The results indicated that the students’ models were more efficient than the lecturer’s. Learning and showing the strategies of guessing words from context encouraged the students to develop their deep thinking strategies when reading academic texts. The focus of this paper is on the treatments to introduce the word guessing strategies to the students in brief.

Keywords: *reading strategies, guessing meaning from context, teaching strategies*

1. Introduction

English was a compulsory subject at tertiary education. Usually, the non-English department students had to learn English at least one semester. The 2016 curriculum run at Politeknik Negeri Bandung is still encouraged the non-English department students to learn English at least two semesters. English lecturers at these departments were often challenged by their students who usually did not have high motivation to learn English because the students usually learned English to improve their speaking skills. However, one of the institutional objectives was to develop students' academic reading skills. Therefore, English lecturers are advised to bridge these mismatched expectations.

When teaching a language, teachers are advised to think of when and how a language is acquired and learned. Some researchers (Krashen and Terrell, 2000) and (Nunan, 1994) distinguish between “acquiring” and “learning”. “Acquiring” is a subconscious process when the learners are picking up the language through rich exposure; while ‘learning’ is a conscious process when the learners are consciously picking and carrying out practices. The language learnt does not ‘turn into’ acquisition unless the input is comprehensible and practiced in a meaningful context (Krashen and Terrell, 2000) as cited in Nunan (1994) and Brown (1994). Learning will only take place when the matter to be learnt is meaningful to the learners (Hutchinson and Waters (1989). This will only take place when the matter to be learnt is interesting to the learners (Hutchinson and Waters (1989). Language teachers need to provide acquisition rich activities, meaningful contexts, and provide meaningful repetition through listening and reading before speaking and writing (Hadaway, Vardell and Young, 2002).

The challenge arises when the language learners do not live in the English speaking environment or they live at a distance from the target language community, such as learning English in Indonesia. However distant they are, language learners have similar learning process and purpose as those who learn the target language as their first language, namely for communicating ideas orally and in written. Since learning English in Indonesia only has limited time, the focus of teaching and learning English at tertiary education is mostly focused on improving academic reading skills. This is to prepare the students to enrich their majoring subjects by means of reading from various academic texts. Therefore, this study was focused and conducted in a reading class at a civil engineering department at Politeknik Negeri Bandung. The purpose of this study was to discover the efficient way to improve students' academic reading skills but at the same time to cater for the students' interests.

This study was conducted based on these claims: “good readers are good guessers” (Nation, 2002). Further, readers are constructing and guessing the meanings, and they read with a certain purpose (Nuttall, 1989). When guessing meanings, they apply all their prior language knowledge such as their large vocabularies, phonemic awareness, knowledge about text features, and a variety of strategies (Paris, Wasik and Turner, 1991) and knowledge about the world. In addition, Nation (2002) claims that the skills of guessing meaning from context are important skills in reading.

Therefore, this study attempted to develop students' reading strategies by means of developing the strategies to guess the meaning of new words encountered

from context (GMFC). This was to cater for the students' perceived problems, the limited vocabulary, and to improve the students' reading skills.

2. Method

This study was carried out to solve the students' perceived problems, namely limited vocabulary. It applied three-cycle qualitative inductive action research conducted together with the students as the stakeholders. The main characteristic of action research is the spiral activity consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Stringer, 1996) as cited in Merawati (2003). The data were collected from students' journals at the end of each cycle. These journals contained the strategies applied when they were guessing the meanings of new words appeared in the provided texts.

3. Results and Discussion

This part explains the treatments, results, and discussion of the study briefly. The treatments were planned and conducted based on the results of students' open questionnaires and discussion with the students conducted at the previous studies (Merawati, 2010). They were conducted to solve the students' perceived problems i.e. limited vocabulary; and the results were derived from the data, in the form of students' journals collected at the evaluation stages at the end of each cycle.

The study had three cycles of treatments. The treatments of Cycle 1 consisted of five individual models run within four weeks. The first model was focusing on identifying the part of speech of words of a text. The students were encouraged to find the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs or the contents words by means the word positions in sentences – as subjects, verbs, objects, adjectives, or adverbs (McComish, 1985). The second model was to find clues of deleted words from the nearest context to larger ones, namely words existed before and after the gaps and ones from other sentences. The third one was to demonstrate and practice mature guessing namely revising, refining and thinking critically. Then, the fourth model was to show guessing strategies using diagrams and other typography clues such as punctuations, bold, italic words, etc. Finally, the students were introduced the process of predicting the meanings of new words from the parts of the words, such as 'lighthouse' from "light + house", and 'remodeled' from 're + model + ed'. The materials used to introduce and practice these strategies were taken from various short simple authentic texts.

Cycle 2 treatments were carried out for seven weeks. They focused on practicing the process of guessing the meanings of unknown words whenever the students met new words in short authentic texts. Other strategies were also introduced i.e. activating the students' prior knowledge, identifying the semantic relation of words especially hyponyms and enlarging the readers' scope of textual context (Nation, 2002). In addition to give a lot of practices, the students were also encouraged to collaborate when guessing some new words in groups.

Cycle 3 treatments which ran for three weeks were to provide practices and allow the students to demonstrate their GMFC models. At the end of each class, some selected students reported the process of guessing to the class orally. At this cycle, the students had a lot of collaborative oral activities and they attempted to express their

logical reasons aloud by working in pairs or in small groups and presenting their strategies orally in front of the class (Nation, 2002). The reading materials were selected from various children encyclopedia. These materials were modified in such a way that the texts stimulated the students to guess purely unknown words and enlarge their textual scopes.

The treatments were evaluated by means of collecting students' journals at the end of each cycle. The improvements of guessing process were evaluated from students' abilities to make use of clues by identifying the words' parts of speech and finding clues from typography, word parts, and locations of the clues, expressing the meanings of unknown words, and monitoring the results of their guesses.

The results of the students' ability to identify the parts of speech of words showed that these students had some language knowledge, namely syntax, and structures (Mikulecky, 1990) so that they were able to construct meanings using bottom-up approach (Aebersold and Field, 1998). The students' ability to identify the part of speech developed from 54% at the end of Cycle 1, to 43% at the end of Cycle 2; however, at the end of Cycle 3, it was going up to 92%.

The students' abilities to find clues can be from word parts and word clues. Their abilities to find word parts developed from 48% at the end of Cycle 1, to 12% at the end of Cycle 2; however, it improved significantly to 62% by the end of Cycle 3. Whereas word clues are function words such as 'or', 'for example', 'to be' and other phrases such as 'called', 'in other words'. The students' abilities to find word clues developed from 11% at the end of Cycle 1, and slightly increased to 20% at the end of Cycle 2; and finally it reached to 21% by the end of Cycle 3. These abilities reflected that when reading, the students or the readers were not focusing on each word but they also looked at the pictures' notes, signaling words and analyzed words.

The locations of context clues show the scope of contexts. This indicates that when reading, students are not focusing on each single word, so that they are able to link ideas and construct meanings from various clues scattered in different places in the texts. This also proved that the students do not read texts linearly but they look the words backwards and forwards and elaborate various tactics. The development of students' scope of context was started from reading linearly at the end of Cycle 1, their scope of contexts was very limited; it was only 1% taken from the paragraph before the new words. However, at the end of Cycle 3 their scope of contexts increased to 31% clues taken from the previous paragraphs and 18% of clues taken from the paragraphs after the new words. In other words, the students' scopes of context were enlarged and they applied more strategies than at Cycle 1.

The ability to express the meaning of new words indicated the students' abilities to construct meanings of the new words based on the clues in the texts and other associations built as a result of reading the texts. This process reflected the students' deep and critical thinking, because they attempted to integrate various aspects of the texts such as the topic of the texts, the ideas of the paragraphs; then, they link and check their guessing their prior knowledge and experiences.

The 3 cycles of treatments developed the students' ability to describe the meaning from 11% at Cycle 1 and 2 to 23% at Cycle 3. The students were also getting flexible by providing multiple guesses. This flexibility improved from 5% at Cycle 1, then 9% at Cycle 2, and finally increased to 11% at Cycle 3. This indicated that they might need to revise the meanings or ideas later, as it was claimed in (Paris, Wasik and Turner, 1991). The result of analyzing the students' guessing process from their

journals indicated that at the end of Cycle 1 and 2, none students did monitoring and checking the results of their guesses. After some students provided models in front of the class in Cycle 3, the number of students who did this process increased from 0% to 24%. This showed that the students were able to think deeply and moved towards better readers because they applied more strategies when guessing.

The results of analyzing the students' guessing process written in their journals at the end of each cycle indicated that the number and the types of strategies applied by the students were significantly increased. This reflected that the students reading skills improved that good readers construct meanings maturely and always monitor their comprehension; they are always ready to refine and revise and evaluate their ideas in (Paris, Wasik and Turner, 1991).

Comparing the results of those three cycles, the result indicated that after some selected students, either the good or the limited ones, gave models in front of the class for three weeks, these students' strategies developed significantly. The models demonstrated the strategies slower and simpler, and they spoke slower and explained the strategies in simple words and sentences. The language used and the strategies demonstrated by the students were at the level of 'comprehensible input' (Krashen and Terrell, 2000) so that those strategies were digestible. Learners' motivation was developed because they were able to practice to speak naturally by expressing what they thought and experienced orally. As a result, the other students were willing and able to imitate and apply more various strategies to guess the meanings of new words from contexts.

4. Conclusion

When teaching English, lectures had to be able to bridge the mismatched expectations. One of the institutional objectives was to develop students' reading skills. On the other hand, the students wanted to be able to speak English fluently; and they were reluctant to read because of their limited vocabulary. Then, the lecturer developed the students' reading skills through developing students' compensation strategies namely guessing meaning from context. To cater for the students' expectation, the lecturer developed the students reading strategies and skills by integrating the four language skills. The students were encouraged to read and guess the important new words encountered in texts. They had to write what they thought by writing the strategies applied in their journals. Finally, they had to report and demonstrate their strategies orally in front of the class. Comparing the strategies written in the students' journals collected at the end of each cycle, it was found that the students' strategies developed significantly after the models were presented by some students. This indicated that the students' models enhanced the development of reading and thinking strategies.

References

- Aebersold, J. A. and Field, M. L. (1998). *From Reader to Reading Teacher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Toronto: Prentice Hall.

- Brown, H. D. (1994). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. NY: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Hadaway, N. L., Vardell, S.M. and Young, T. A. (2002). *Literature-Based Instruction with English Language Learners*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon University Press.
- Hutchinson, T. and Waters, A. (1989). *English for Specific Purposes*. New York: Cambridge
- Krashen, S.D. and Terrell, T.D. (2000). *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*. England: Prentice Hall Europe.
- McComish, J. (1985). *Grammar for Teachers of English as A Second Language*. Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington
- Merawati, M.V. J. (2003). Improving Reading Strategies and Skills through Guessing Meanings from Context. Bandung: Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. Tesis Program Master.
- Merawati, M.V. J. (2010). The Development of Students' Learning Autonomy in an English as a Foreign Language Reading Class. Bandung: Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. Dissertation.
- Mikulecky, B. S. (1990). *A Short Course in Teaching Reading Skills*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company Press
- Nation, I. S. P. (2002). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1994). *Collaborative Language Learning and Teaching*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Nuttall, C. (1989). *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. London: Heinemann.
- Paris, S. G., Wasik, B. A., and Turner, J. C. (1991). 'The Development of Strategic Readers', in Barr, R. and Kamil, M. L. (eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research*, (609-723). New York: Longman .
- Stringer, E. T. (1996). *Action Research*. London: Sage Publications.