

## THE ROLE OF GRADED READING MATERIALS IN TEACHING READING OF EFL LEARNERS

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### Abstract

*One of the priority purpose of teaching English as a foreign language to Indonesian people is that they can read in order to grasp the idea and to understand the book written in English. The ability to read is crucial for the students in reaching both the academic and society success. The successfulness of teaching reading cannot be separated from the skill of selecting an appropriate reading material. By reading an appropriate reading material, the students can effectively expand their knowledge; train their brain to think and acquire new information and idea. This paper aimed at discussing the role of graded reading materials in teaching reading of EFL learners. A number of studies point out that the L2 learners will feel motivated and enjoy in learning the language if the anxiety levels are as low as possible. Graded reading material which is written in various levels of reading, meets the needs of today's language learners by maximizing reading opportunities in an enjoyable, relaxing and accessible way.*

**Keywords:** *Graded Reading Material, Reading Comprehension.*

### 1. Introduction

In language teaching and learning, the term of material is used to refer to anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language (Tomlinson, 2011). Considering that respect, materials could obviously be videos, DVDs, emails, YouTube, dictionaries, grammar books, readers, workbooks or photocopied exercises. Additionally, they could also be newspapers, food packages, photographs, tasks written on cards or discussions between learners. Keeping this pragmatic concept of materials in mind can help materials developers to utilize as many sources of input as possible and, even more importantly, can help teachers to realize that they are also materials developers and that they are ultimately responsible for the materials that their learners use.

In teaching reading, selecting or developing teaching materials have to be the biggest priority for the teachers. Teaching materials must be motivating and raise learners' interest. If teaching materials are not interesting and motivating, learners will learn nothing (Tomlinson, 2012). Meanwhile, Renaissance Learning (2012) point

out that students show the most reading improvement if they regularly practice reading within a range of difficulty that is neither too challenging nor too easy. In order to help learners learn better, a lot of researchers, therefore, suggest that level of the text must be closely relevant to the students reading level (Allington, 2012).

Meanwhile, various studies show that graded reading materials meet the needs of reading materials today. Graded reading materials or graded readers which are known as a set of reading texts which are specially written in various readability levels and adapted for second language learners, involve severely restricting the vocabulary and controlling the grammatical structures that occur, and matching the length of text to the vocabulary and grammar controls (Nation & Ming-tzu, 1999). This paper, therefore, discusses deeply the implementation of graded reading material in teaching reading of EFL learners in order to look at how important it is as reading materials in supporting students' reading comprehension.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### *Teaching Reading in EFL Context*

As one of the language skills, comprehension of written texts or reading skill forms the stepping stone for the education of a learner. According to Addison (1996, p. 3), "Reading is an active process in which readers shift sources of information (what they know and what the text says), elaborate meaning and strategies, check their interpretation (revising when appropriate) and use the social context to focus their response". Iwuk (2007) states that reading is the heart of education, by reading, student can acquires all information about development of science and technologies, improves their thinking, generates idea, and solves their problems. Regarding that explanation, Kellerman (1996) emphasizes that teaching students to read must be the highest priority, if the students cannot read they will have low achievement, so they are on the road to academic failure.

Meanwhile, Richard and Schmidt (2002) state that reading can be done by saying a written text aloud which called oral reading or by comprehending a written text

silently which is called reading comprehension. Cooper, Warncke, and Shipman (1998, p. 24) divide reading comprehension achievement into five categories (1) meaning vocabulary in which the reader is concerned with learning the meaning of words he or she reads; (2) literal comprehension is concern with the information and idea that are explicitly stated in the selection; (3) inferential comprehension is concerned with drawing conclusion, generalizing or interpreting what is read; (4) applied comprehension is implicit schema that requires integration of new information into the readers' previous knowledge, from which new relationships emerge; and (5) critical reading requires reading with an inquiring mind and with active, creative looking for false statements.

Furthermore, Berry (2005) states that comprehension consists of three different levels which called literal level, interpretive level and applied level. *Literal level* regarded as the simplest skill, at this level the reader or student can attempt to answer the question: *what did the author say?* At this level the reader or the student would not have to understand the true meaning of the whole paragraph or text, because they can answer the question correctly only by looking at what was written by an author with little interpretation is need. At second level of comprehension, interpretative level, the student can attempt to answer this question: *what was meant by what was said?* At this level, students are attempting to understand what the author meant by what she/he said in the story, paragraph or textbook. It is presumed that students have already memorized certain facts at the literal level and then they are attempting to see the implications of the author's words. The last level is called the applied level. At this level, the students can attempt to answer this question: *How would the author's message apply to other situations give what you memorized and understood at the other two levels?* At this level, the students are attempting to elevate or rise their thinking one more "notch" or level to more critical, analyzing level. This presumes that you already reached the previous two levels. In other words, the students have to read between the lines and then examining the messages from the author and attempting to apply that message to other settings.

In addition to the level of comprehension, Cooper, et al (1988) state that there are at least seven reading skills which should be mastered by ELF learners including the ability to answer question about main idea (MI), detail (D), Sequence (Sq), Inference (If), Reference (R), cause effect (C/E), and vocabulary (V). By considering the previous explanations, Cunningham and Zibulsky (2013) conclude that reading is a very rich, complex and cognitive act that offers an immense opportunity to exercise human intelligence in ways we lose if we don't read. Reading provides students with a cognitive workout that transcends not only our inherent abstract problem-solving abilities, but also our levels of education (Bridges, 2014). In line with this, in maximizing students reading skill, the EFL teachers are regarded need to provide as appropriate as possible reading materials which are matched not only with the students' reading interest, but also more importantly with their reading level.

#### *The Considerations in Selecting Instructional Materials*

Richards (2005) states that effective instructional materials in language teaching are shaped by considering three factors: teacher, learner, and contextual variables. Teacher factors consist of the teacher's language proficiency, training and experience, cultural background, and preferred teaching style. Learner factors include learners' learning style preferences, their language learning needs, interests, motivations and reading level. Contextual factors consist of the school culture, classroom conditions, class size, and availability of teaching resources in situations where the materials will be used.

Meanwhile, Tomlinson (2011, p.10) explains that there are fifteen basic principles of second language acquisition that must be relevant to the selected materials used in ELT. The principles are as follows

1. Materials should achieve impact or can arouse the learners' curiosity, interest and attention by providing pictures.
2. Materials should help learners to feel ease; they must be set based on students' achievement.

3. Materials should help learners to develop confidence.
4. The materials taught should be perceived by learners as relevant and useful for students' real life.
5. Materials should require and facilitate learner self investment i.e. learners profit most if they invest interest, effort and attention in the leaning activity.
6. Learners must be ready to acquire the point being taught i.e. the materials should consider the students' prior knowledge.
7. The learners' attention should be drawn to linguistics feature of input i.e. the materials developed may arouse students' comprehension, implicitly or explicitly.
8. Materials should provide the learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purpose.
9. Materials should take into account that positive effects of instruction are usually delayed.
10. Materials should take into account that learners differ in learning style.
11. Materials should take into account that learners differ in effective attitudes.
12. Materials should permit a silent period at the beginning of the instruction
13. Material should maximize learning potential by encouraging intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional involvement which stimulates both right and left brain activities.
14. Materials should not rely too much on controlled practice.
15. Materials should provide opportunities for outcome feedback.

Moreover, since students' needs, interest, motivations and reading level are known as important considerations in selecting the instructional materials, the teacher, therefore, have to consider firstly whether or not the materials selected match with their students' levels, needs, interest and motivation. When classroom teachers provided students with easy access to a wide range of interesting texts, the effects on comprehension and motivation to read were enormous, hence learners would be more motivated to succeed in learning any language (Wan-a-rom, 2011).

### *Graded Reading Materials*

Macmillan Education (2014) states that graded reading materials that also known as graded readers are short books and audio books, encompassing both fiction and non-fiction genres which is written in various levels of reading, thus, the students will find the quick and easy to read. Levels in graded reading material are carefully graded from starter to upper intermediate to help the students choose the right material for their ability. In other words, it offers a wide and attractive range of short, learner-friendly books which can be read quickly, easily and enjoyably. In line with the previous explanations, Malone (2013) states that graded reading material must consist of reading passages that are arranged according to several levels started from the lowest level to the highest one.

Additionally, Malone also emphasize that each level of text ideally is constructed not only in different readability level, but also in different purpose and use, for the example: level 1 is used for people or students who are learning to read in their 1 or a new language, level 2 for people who want to gain reading fluency, then level 3 for people who want to know more about the languages that they have learned, and the last, level 4 for people who have become life-long readers and learners. In other words, each text is suited in terms of its features, length, topic, pictures, format and language by considering the background or reading level of the readers.

### *The Rules and the Characteristics*

Each text in graded reading materials has different characteristics, and it can be seen on its purposes, features, formats, contents, picture, and length. For the example: the lowest level tends to have the easiest language, or vocabulary, the shortest length, and also completed the biggest picture. Therefore, there are some rules that followed by the writer in constructing graded reading materials which also proposed by Malone (2013, p. 5). The rules are as follows.

1. Keep the stories short and easy to read. The short, well-written and easy-to-read stories provide readers with successful early reading experiences and encourage them to continue reading for learning and for enjoyment.
2. Use natural language. New readers may not be able to read quickly, therefore the use of natural language very recommended to be used in order to keeps them from having a meaningful reading experience.
3. Write about things that are familiar and interesting to the readers. When reading materials are about something that is familiar to them, new readers can use their own knowledge and experience to help them understand the written text.
4. Write about things that can be pictured. New readers also use pictures to help them understand written texts. It may be difficult to create pictures that communicate emotions, thoughts or speech so write about activities that can be shown clearly in a picture.
5. Write for a specific person representing the people who will read the story. Think of a specific person you know personally who represents the larger group of intended readers and write specifically for that person. That will help to ensure that the story is interesting to others in larger group.
6. For more experienced readers the writer can write differently. In this case, please use more descriptive words and phrases. Then, introduce new ideas and information that will be interesting to the readers.

One important point is that when using graded reading materials, the teachers have to bear in mind of the learners' level. Determining students reading level is regarded as the key activity of constructing graded reading materials, in short, it is used as basic consideration of selecting on which level of text will be started and ended. For more than 50 years, readability formulas have helped teachers, match books to students. Readability formulas use objective measurements to analyze text and predict which materials can be comprehended by individual readers (*Renaissance Learning, 2012*). Thus, after the reading level of the students was considered through

standardized test, the readability texts are then calculated, after that the texts finally can be graded closely relevant to the students' level.

### *The Role of Graded Reading Materials in ELT*

During the past decades, searching for appropriate and effective teaching materials occupies a great space of instructors' thinking. Using inappropriate teaching materials makes learners face difficulties in learning a foreign language. Obviously, graded reading materials can have several learning goals in ELT, these include gaining skill and fluency in reading, establishing previously learned vocabulary and grammar, learning new vocabulary and grammar, and gaining pleasure from reading (Nation and Ming-tzu, 1999). Moreover, graded reading scheme consists of a series of vocabulary and grammar levels with several readers available at each level of the scheme, a low proficiency learner would begin read this reading book at the lowest level of the scheme, and when reading at that level was comfortable, the students could move to the book at the next level.

Meanwhile, the obvious evidence of the utilization of graded reading materials was shown on the research taken by Wan-a-rom (2011). The study was aimed to examine how EFL learners of English reacted to graded readers in terms of reading strategy use, comprehension, speed, and attitude as well as motivation when control for ability level was determined. Eighty Thai high school students placed into their own reading level of graded readers by the scores gained from the graded reading-vocabulary size test participated in a six-week-extensive reading project. Through observations, semi-structured interviews, book journals, and post-reading questionnaires was found that comprehension, attitude and motivation were cultivated during the implementation of graded reading materials.

In line with Wan-a-rom's study, the important roles of graded reading materials were also reflected on the study done by some researchers in Indonesia, they were Monica (2016); Ningtiyas (2016); Indriyani (2016); Sari (2016), and Rawiha (2016). They all focused on measuring the potential effect of graded reading materials on



students reading achievement. Graded reading materials were given to the students in some cities including Palembang, Baturaja, Lubuklinggau, and Pangkal Pinang.

Through reading comprehension test, it was found that the students mostly have good scores after been taught by using graded reading materials, moreover through the questionnaires, they confessed that they felt happy, enjoy and interested to learn English by using this reading material. Additionally, since each level of text in graded reading materials were followed by comprehension questions, the teachers, therefore, can also use it as reading assessment to measure students' reading achievement or even more importantly, to determine student's reading level.

### **3. Conclusion**

Graded reading material or graded readers is a set of reading texts which written in various levels of reading. Levels in graded reading material are carefully graded from starter to upper intermediate to help the students choose the right material for their ability. After going through the related literature, it is obvious that the use of graded reading materials in language teaching is supported by many researchers. Graded reading materials meet the needs of today's language learners which effectively maximizing the reading opportunities in an enjoyable, relaxing and accessible way. Furthermore, some studies also show that graded reading material plays important role in gaining skill and fluency in reading, establishing previously learned vocabulary and grammar, learning new vocabulary and grammar, and gaining pleasure from reading. Additionally, since graded reading materials are also completed by comprehension questions, so it also can be used as a tool in determining students' reading comprehension and even, their reading level.

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