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Exploring the Challenges of Reading Comprehension Teaching for English Proficiency Test Preparation Class in Indonesia

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Abstract

As one of the tested skills within popular English proficiency tests in Indonesia such as IELTS and TOEFL, good command of reading comprehension skill is pivotal for the test takers. The nature of reading skill in testing circumstances, however, demands precision in decision making. Enabling test taker candidates with such precision in test preparation class, then, dictates the teaching of the skill consequently. This paper discusses the commonly found challenges in teaching the skill for the test preparation class with known diverse students age and background. The primary aim of the study is to provide insightful information about those challenges which may, then, contribute to better teaching of the skill. The critical analysis of the relevant literature suggests that the challenges are comprised of three domains: students' unequal linguistic competence, different level of students' critical thinking, and also their motivation. The paper concludes by re-emphasising the crucial role of pre-test for the test taker candidates prior to commencing the preparation class, especially for instructors to map and to anticipate these challenges with more reflective and equitable teaching approach which is informed by the pre-test result.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Test Preparation Class, English Proficiency Test, Reading Comprehension Challenges

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1. Introduction

Regardless of the complexity of reading comprehension process, understanding the processes of its components deeply is demanding attention as a step of addressing and anticipating the difficulties efficiently and effectively (Kendeou, McMaster, & Christ, 2016). In any reading comprehension teaching context, identifying the difficulties should be the priority since it may lead to better instructional approaches that will work to minimise and possibly eliminate those students' reading constraints. In addition to its complexities, readers and even sometimes instructors, or in this case course instructors, consider understanding represented meaning of

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each sentence is sufficient. This perception, though, is not entirely accurate. A reader must generate the essential meaning among sentences while considering the writer's purpose and motives in writing the texts (Graeser, 2015; Kendeou, McMaster, & Christ, 2016) especially for questions that demand more wholistic understanding to answer and require higher order thinking skills to interpret accurately (i.e. indirectly stated information). Practically, this is what proficient readers do while taking reading tests.

In a similar vein, Irvine-Niakara & Kiely (2015) also emphasise the importance to understand the processes of reading comprehension before planning the approach for the three regular reading phases in the classroom: pre reading, while reading, and post reading. The cruciality of this careful planning of teaching should be considered because it ensures the readers, or in this case, learners to keep engaging throughout these phases. In a test preparation class, for instance, learners' engagement is one of the domains that must be maintained at a high level since this context is more serious and the learning objective is stricter. The cognitive factors such as students' prior knowledge of English and the reading skill they already possess, and the personal factor such as motivation and reluctance, in this circumstance, becomes regular considerations for instructors to be always controlled and anticipated. This paper investigates such factors in the form of possible challenges that preparation class instructors have to encounter in teaching reading skill test section.

Studies related to standardised test preparation in Indonesia, or EFL context in general, have been carried out in different angles. However, very few of those studies have focused on the challenges of teaching one skill section especially reading comprehension skill. Mahmud (2014) suggests that language testing is one of the elements of teaching process which has been the issues that attract the focus of educational researchers in different countries and contexts. She verifies the urgency to investigate teaching challenges in testing nature even further since testing has always become one of the most crucial indicators for policy makers and teaching practitioners to be informed about teaching success.

Studies about the standardises English tests have also been carried out to investigate cognitive and noncognitive factors in testing nature. Fahim et al. (2010), for example, explore the relation of critical thinking ability with test takers' achievements in reading section of the TOEFL test. They document the significant relation between higher order thinking skill and higher achievement of students in testing circumstances. They also point out the importance of dealing with different level of critical thinking among students individually. In a similar vein, Arabsarhangi and Noroozi (2014) investigate the relationship between learners' self-awareness and performance with reading comprehension test types. This study informs about the crucial role of self-efficacy as well as students' perception about their own precision in decision making not only during the test, but also during the process of preparation course itself.

Earlier, Zareva (2005) studies TOEFL in the new format. Numerous studies are also conducted about IELTS reading tests (e.g., Zahra & Behzad, 2012; Moussa, Sima, & Elham, 2016); Stephen, 2013) especially about the cognitive response, strategy and processing. This fact validates the claim that standardised English proficiency tests have a pivotal function as a testing instrument in measuring English proficiency, including reading comprehension ability. These studies also affirm that

the nature of standardised testing of English is not a new research focus. Though, none of these studies takes a narrower focus to investigate the challenges in one assigned skill.

In standardised English proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, reading skill is one of the tested, and the standard is set high. Though, the passing grades of both tests are varied depending on the test takers' targets and their initial intention for taking these tests. Reading comprehension parts in these tests are commonly given in multiple choices form. As suggested by many researchers (e.g., Irvine-Niakara & Kiely, 2015; Macalister, 2011; Phakiti, 2006; Wallace, 1992) teaching a multiple-choice form of questions may provide course instructors with the information for guiding the students to understand the test. Hence, instructors are benefited by this form of testing because the instructional approach of teaching the texts and helping students to understand them is built around the questions rather than the texts. Thus, interaction in the classroom of such context is focused by the teacher on the most compatible strategies of answering the questions through modelling and raising the awareness of the strategy. However, the question arises now whether this instructional approach addresses the learners' difficulties or not.

To address that question in Indonesian context where English is a foreign language, it is necessary to overview the nature of English reading and readers in Indonesia. In this country, especially in public schools, English is a compulsory subject. Prior to 2013 curriculum, English reading learning begins at the primary schools from fourth grade, and it is continuously conducted in secondary schools until the high school level (Hamra & Syatriana, 2010). Though, the learning objectives in those stages are not at the same level as the objectives set in learning reading for standardised tests mentioned previously. These objectives shift from general to more specifically standardised objectives. The general reading learning objectives such as being able to read aloud, being able to read with right pronunciation, and being able to retell the story are polarised into one specific objective when it comes to reading learning in a test preparation class which is to reach targeted score.

Combining the two ideas discussed in the previous paragraphs together, the general idea of how instructional approach of reading comprehension teaching in a test preparation class context can be generated. Instructors should overview three factors of teaching reading process: learners' difficulties, learning objectives, and the testing format. The last two mentioned can be easily observed and reflected by the instructors while understanding learners' difficulties is not that easy as it is a consequence of reading process complexity as suggested by Kendeou, McMaster and Christ (2016) above. This is the part that challenges the instructors' cognition. Causes of students' difficulties are abstract yet personally different which makes them indeed challenging for instructors to pinpoint. However, researchers (e.g., Alderson, Nieminen, & Huhta, 2016; Marzban & Bharati, 2016) have simplified the causes into three factors for instructors to observe: readers' linguistic competence, critical thinking gap among learners, and reading motivation. Therefore, this study argues that those three factors are instructors' challenges that should be dealt with in teaching reading comprehension for English proficiency test preparation class in Indonesia.

2. Methodology

To explore the challenges of reading comprehension teaching in such highly demanding testing need, previous studies related to the reading comprehension process, cognitive and noncognitive factors that surround reading learning of students, and studies that are closely related to the discussed matter from English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts are collected. The insights from the collated literature are synthesised and then critically discussed in order to generate links that inform the proximities of possible challenges encountered by the test taker candidates in test preparation class settings.

3. Findings and Discussion

From the stated argument after the literature review, this section critically discusses the three domains that tend to become challenges for instructors to anticipate in teaching reading skill in a test preparation class settings namely linguistic competence, critical thinking and motivation. This section is elaborated with an argumentative perspective in order to validate the strength of the arguments being made and to cover the controversies surrounding the issue at the same time.

3.1. Pinpointing learners' necessary linguistic competence

There are four basic language elements: pronunciation, spelling, grammar and vocabulary. Jeon and Yamashita (2014) in their research find that grammar and vocabulary are statistically the determining variables in ESL and EFL reading comprehension. This means that proficient readers tend to master sentence structure and vocabulary better. This mastery gives them the edge comparing to the less proficient readers concerning generating the syntactical and semantical context clues from a given text. The edge occurs because of the vocabulary mastery, collaborating with test takers' background knowledge, enables these readers to sense the semantic features of a test while they generate the sentence structure awareness using their syntactic features understanding in the same time. On the other hand, learners with poorer mastery of those elements tend to fail in generating the context clues because they lack these basics.

Sparks et al. (1998) explain that learners with average proficiency level are still possible to encounter difficulties in English as a foreign language setting including reading comprehension learning in English proficiency test preparation class. They also add that regarding being sources of proficiency measurements, those language elements discussed previously are better ability predictors of productive language skills (e.g., writing and speaking) instead of receptive language skills such as listening and reading comprehension. These theories are still valid and thought-provoking in recent researches on reading comprehension (e.g., Alderson, Huhta, & Nieminen, 2016; Sparks et al., 2008).

These two theories, to some extent, are understandable. Good readers indeed face challenges as they read. This perhaps due to the difficulty level of the text and unfamiliarity to the presented context of the given texts. At this stage, however, this has no significant relation with grammar and vocabulary mastery of the readers, but instead, it has more to do with the background knowledge. This essay is aware of the pivotal role played by background knowledge that one needs to uphold in

comprehending the text and making inferences. About the incompatibility of grammar and vocabulary as predictors of comprehension ability, this essay state it depends on the types of questions. In reading section of TOEFL for instance, the 'who', 'when', 'where', and 'synonym-antonym' types of multiple-choice questions can be easily answered by readers with sufficient proficiency of the two language elements.

As discussed, theories by Sparks et al. (1998) above are valid. Grammar and vocabulary are not the assurances of successful comprehension. Mehrdad et al. (2012), in addition, suggest that there is no automatic success of reading comprehension, no matter how good one's grammar and vocabulary mastery are. They find that the successful comprehension depends on cognitive efforts directed by the readers while reading a text which is known as metacognitive processing. This is where the instructors play the crucial role. Instructors may administer pre-test as one of the scaffolding steps to obtain information about learners' grammar and vocabulary mastery in their classroom. Using the obtained information, instructors will have access to direct learners' mastery of those elements into effective cognitive efforts in the form of strategies and self-efficacies that may lead to the successful comprehension. When the instructors are successful in directing this, they may produce proficient readers that master not only language elements but also familiar with rigorous reading strategies. This is supported by Sungatullina, Zalyaeva, and Gorelova, (2016) stating that strategy use, self-efficacy, and readers proficiency are interconnected.

3.2 Predicting critical thinking gap among learners

Critical thinking is a person's cognitive process that represents opinions, which are complicated, that enables one to obtain information and conduct logical judgement to the given context before giving sufficient attention to the matter (Moon, 2008). Familiarising one's self with critical thinking skills helps in making better yet rigorous instructed decisions regarding accuracy and effective positioning while dealing with the context (Marzban & Barati, 2012). Success in developing these skills makes it possible for learners to dig deeper into the context they are exploring and to extract the critical information and arguments (Cottrell, 2005). As every learning process involves reading, learners ability to be critical of the subjects is shaped by the critical thinking skills.

Improvement of reading comprehension achievement is a parallel of learners' critical thinking improvement concerning critical thinking ability and effective reading strategy choice (Marzban & Barati, 2016). A critical reader tends to achieve better in comprehension tests comparing to less critical readers. As explained above, critical readers possess the ability to decide logically the most effective strategy that corresponds to the context and the nature of questions being asked. These readers are better in noticing the interrelation among the text, the critical information, the questions followed, and the compatible strategy. However, learners who fail in sensing these links, tend to have harder times in dealing with the text and the questions. Their judgements are merely based on the word per word meaning or perhaps sentence per sentence meaning without understanding the flow of the given information, the coherence and the context clues from the text. The different level of critical judgement upon the information provided is what creates the gap of critical thinking ability among learners that teacher must be aware of prior to teaching and administering the textual quizzes for them to practice. Minding this gap becomes the

real challenge for instructors when it comes to teaching reading section in English proficiency test preparation class especially in EFL context.

However, with its abstractly complex nature, Kiely and Davis (2010) state that it is impossible for Instructors to fully understand the processes of reading by simply relying on manuals of teaching methodology and implement them in the classroom. As discussed earlier, this can be considered a valid statement. The learning objectives contained in the syllabus and covered in lesson plan can only give preliminary information about how teaching should be approached and in what direction it should flow. These objectives cannot give a clear picture of learners' different levels of proficiency that instructors will deal with which, to some extent, may give teaching advantage once it is noticed beforehand. On this stage, early scaffolding steps to reveal these abstractions of reading processes are necessary.

As recommended in the previously discussed challenge about linguistic competence, reading pre-test in the first meeting of a test preparation class can also be the scaffolding in revealing critical thinking gap among learners. The result of this preliminary test can help the instructors to map the reading ability of their learners. Some question types following the text in TOEFL such as the '*main idea*', '*mentioned or unmentioned information*', and '*implied information*' for instance, are questions that may help to reveal critical thinking ability. This enables the teacher to bring this abstraction into the mathematically visible measurement. The next step of scaffolding step is correlating instructors' knowledge about the texts that will be administered into the class the following meetings with information of learners' reading abilities and difficulties. This is a highlight of Irvine-Niakaris and Kiely (2015) research finding that shows how reading tests are not merely a media of teaching practice because their capability of measuring learners' comprehension level, correlated with instructors' knowledge about the texts presented, can assist instructors in deciding the rigorous teaching approach. This proves that the challenge of understanding learners' critical thinking gap, despite its abstract nature, is approachable yet solvable.

3.3 Predicting and encouraging learners' reading motivation

As people approach learning differently, the notion of learning motivation can never be neglected in any learning context. In attempting to comprehend a text, for instance, there is a phase where readers question themselves before starting the reading. They ask whether they will be able to understand the given text or not, and whether they want to read and why they want to do it. This is what is modelled by Wigfield and Eccles (2000) as the expectancy-value framework of motivation in the academic world. This also applies to learners in the classroom setting. When instructors distribute reading texts, learners will start this questioning phase. It is vital that they understand what to expect from reading and how the values of reading it are felt.

Not every learner understands the expectancy and the value of reading the learning material. This is what distinguished motivated learners from the rest. Though it is possible to turn the less motivated learners to become more motivated and in the classroom context, the instructors are the ones who can make it. Instructors possess the ability to change learners' attitude toward learning become more positive (Alderson, Huhta, & Nieminen, 2016). The real challenge here is how the teacher can

approach learning that directs learners into realising the expectancy and values of the reading material brought into the class.

Nevertheless, some researchers do not consider motivation factor as a matter of concern in teaching reading comprehension. Alexander and Jetton (2000) suggest that motivation, comparing to prior knowledge, has very little influence in comprehension process. It is considered that prior knowledge generates motivation, not the other way around. Moreover, Sparks and Ganschow (1995) have explained that poor attitude, low motivation, and high anxiety are not the main causes of issues in foreign language learning. Basically, these researchers agree that prior knowledge is the most decisive factor.

Cognitive constructs such as prior knowledge, linguistic competence, critical thinking ability are perhaps the determining factors in reading performance. However, Anmarkrud and Braten (2009) suggest that instructors and researchers on this receptive skill should not overlook the benefit of promoting motivation to read. Despite not being the primary cause of reading problems, this factor is still worth focusing since it can be the trigger of stimulating and optimising those cognitive constructs. The result of the research by Anmarkrud and Braten (2009) indicates that learners who consider reading activities as important, intrinsically motivating, and useful are also more possible to perform better. This indication applies to not only general English classroom context but also in English proficiency test preparation class where reading skill is one of the taught section.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

In summary, teaching reading comprehension especially in a test preparation class is indeed very challenging. When it comes to this teaching in EFL context as in Indonesia, the challenges, as explained throughout the essays, exist from the very basic to the more complex level; from differences in linguistic competence, critical thinking ability gap, and motivation issues. Learners face difficulties in comprehending the texts and these difficulties are varied one to another because of different mastery level of grammar and vocabulary and inability, of some, to be critical about the given texts. As a noncognitive factor, motivation also influences reading achievement from a psychological standpoint. Considering the objective of teaching in a test preparation class, any factors that correlate with the achievement cannot be left unaddressed. Addressing these factors has been argued, in this essay, to be the challenges encountered by the instructors in such context.

This essay has also discussed how those challenges are possible to be anticipated by the instructors. It has been shown that administering pre-test in the early meeting can be the scaffolding to obtain the preliminary information that picture learners' level of critical thinking and their knowledge of necessary language elements that will be used as the basics to direct and to improve their reading learning. Motivation, on the other hand, can usually be noticed from the ongoing teaching process and become more evident as the number of meeting increases. Further investigation of English skills teaching in a unique context such as the test preparation class is required as learning in this type of class is becoming a trend nowadays with the established use of standardised tests as language proficiency measurement. For the course instructors, it is suggested to administer pre-test that

represents the real test, but in easier level, in the first meeting of the class and then reflect on the learners' results in the teaching strategy choice for the upcoming meetings. Quizzes are also suggested to be given at every meeting to keep informed about the learners' progress during the teaching process. Enjoyable and easily followed teaching is also necessary to boost learners' motivation in reading comprehension learning. Though, the link among these teaching processes, the teaching strategy, and learning objective must always be prioritised and maintained throughout the course. The success of sensing the challenges and reflecting on them will result in teaching that bridges learners' needs with the learning objectives effectively.

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