EFL Students Reading Skills In The Digital Era:

What The Reading Teachers Say

Radiatan Mardiah
radiams@gmail.com
Universitas Jambi

Indri Anastasia
indri.anastasia@unja.ac.id
Universitas Jambi

Abstract

In a time when technology is growing and changing rapidly, reading abilities remain central to students academic development. The purpose of this study is to describe the point of view of English Reading Teachers at Jambi University about EFL students reading skills in digital era based on their experience in teaching reading. The point of views covered three main topics: the reading learning outcomes, the reading learning activities, and the reading learning resources. Focus group discussion with ten reading teachers of Jambi University was used to get the data. The teachers said that the reading skills of the students are not sufficient to help them in touch with the digital era although they have digital gadget at hands. Some of the students are reluctant to read and they are lack of reading strategies, literally and critically. Effective instruction and consistent reading practice and use over long periods of time is required in order to develop the EFL students reading skills.

Key words: reading skills, EFL learners, digital era

Introduction

Literacy level in Indonesia is in low position. It is the last three among ASEAN countries. Based on UNESCO data, reading level index of Indonesian people only 0.001, which means only one person out of 1.000 citizen who reads seriously. This situation is in reverse line with the increase of internet use.

Reading as one of the literacy skill is the key word of success. It is one of important language skills. As a long lasting habit, reading open the door to critical thinking development and imaginative power support. Reading is the major access to the room of knowledge, particularly for EFL students.

Based on some informal classroom discussions in EFL class in Jambi University, the students mentioned that reading, especially in English, is not their habit. Only a few of them that regards reading as their habit and hobby. In the same

boat, in an informal talk, the lecturers groaned that some of their students are poor readers.

In the curriculum being used in English study program, there are three level of reading courses. The first one Reading for General Purposes. The second one Reading for Professional Purposes, and the last one Reading for Academic Purposes. All of the reading courses is intended to develop students reading ability in post-intermediate level. However, this objective was developed based on the assumption of the curriculum designer and not research based.

This paper is part of a research on reconstructing Reading Courses syllabus in Jambi University. The point of views of the experienced Reading teachers are needed for the reconstruction. Focus group discussion was used to get the data. The focus group discussion was held at UPT Kebahasaan Universitas Jambi at the third of August 2017. There were ten participants of the discussion. In this paper they are called teachers instead of lecturers, because the focus is on their job as teacher and not on their job as researcher or as community servant. These participants were selected based on the criteria that they have been teaching for more than 10 years and have experiences in teaching reading courses. All of them were pseudonym with codes T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10.

There were three main themes discussed. The first one is the learning outcomes of the learning of reading skills of the EFL students. The second is the learning activities which is approppriate for the teaching and learning of EFL reading and the last one is the learning resources that empowered in the EFL students reading skills.

Theoritical Background

The use of technology in language learning increase significantly. According to Warschauer (1998) economic and social changes increase the need to deal with large amounts of information and across-culturel communication. In this information-rich time, memorisation becomes less important compared to effective search strategies. Students need the ability to respond and adapt to the changes. He described some of the skills needed in using technology to locate, evaluate, and use information. They include being able to develop research question, determine the most likely places to seek information, select the correct search tool, formulate appropriate search queries, rapidly evaluate the result of search query, save and archive located information, and cite or refer to the located information.

Nowadays, global volume of scientific output are published in English, high percentage of global commerce is conducted in English, and the political and cultural discussions is also in English. They are the reason why in his newer article, Warschauer (2011) empasized the need of reading ability for students. He stated 'the ability to read English is critical for participation in the knowledge economy and information society'. It means the students need more than basic reading skills. The competent reading requires higher level domain-general processing speed, working memory, strategic problem solving, and attentional switching.

There are two reading modes: from print and from digital displays. Reading printed text tend to significantly different from reading online text.Traditional newspaper and printed book are in decline, and so are certain forms of reading. Digital reading combines script with pictures, video, and music. It offers alternatives to many printed formats.

Mikulecky (2011;17) described that students need to do some activities in order to read well in English. They are:

a) developing a schema of a reading process that reading is thinking.
b) talking with others and explain how they make sense of text.
c) developing reading fluency.
d) reading extensively and discussing reading with others who can model the literate behaviors
e) vary reading rate to suit with reading purpose.
f) connecting what they already know and what they are reading.
g) strengthening both top-down and bottom-up processing abilities.
h) mastering the basic 2,000 words that constitute approximately 80 percent of all texts in English
i)acquiring specific reading comprehension skills and learning to apply them strategically.

From those activities can be drawn some reading competences and the skills needed by the students. The skills has been grouped and categorized in Barret taxonomy, a taxonomy made by Thomas C. Barret in 1968. The categories are used to develop instructional activities, identifying questions, and specifying reading comprehension (in Javed, 2015). But those skills do not specifically address online reading skills.

The students reading habit is affected by digital technology although the students still read the printed text. In majority, according to Akarsu and Dariyemez (2014), students use digital technology to read for news, to check email, to look at weather forecast, and to read comics.

To develop the reading habit, Gambrel (2015) suggested 3 main promising ways. They are designing reading lesson based on motivational principles, develop the reading skills which are relevan with real life, and make them complete with interesting and challenging texts and tasks.

Based on a research about reading habits conducted by Syafitri (2016), students of Jambi University read about 2 until 12 hours a day. Some interesting type of reading materials for them are novel, news, entertainment, caption, blog, quotes, and recipes. They read to get more knowledge, for pleasure, for academic tasks, to enlarge vocabulary, and to overcome dyslexia.

This research result is different from Iftanti (2012) statement who said that although students have read in English since elementary school, they do not indicate to have good English reading habits. They are lack of language ability in general, study skills, and way of developing self skill.

It is undeniable that in the era of technology, internet and other digital solution lead the innovation. Molchanova (2015;140) describes that the use of

information technology in the educational process open the chance to the realisation of personally oriented learning. Students can enlarge their academic point of view by browsing the academic materials or even the social media. However, some of them are not discipline. And it may be resulted in internet addiction.

Discussions

Reading Learning Outcomes:

The first topic of discussion is the reading learning outcomes and the title of the courses offered for reading. Talking about learning outcomes, all participant teachers agree that reading is not only for the students academic life but also for developing their future, such as being able to teach reading, starts from learning to read until reading to learn. This point of view is in line with the students profile of English study program for academic year 2017-2021. They are prepared to be English teacher, to be a beginning researcher, and to be an entrepreneur in language based activity.

However, the participant teachers argued about the learning outcomes of each course. In the being used and unrevised reading syllabuses there is no clear cut among the learning outcomes of Reading for General Purpose, Reading for General Purpose, and Reading for Academic Purpose.

It is written in e-campus that Reading for General Purpose is designed to help students to improve their strategies in skimming and scanning to find main ideas, supporting ideas, and general and specific information in a text for general communication (e-campus). In Reading for Professional Purposes (or Reading for Professional Context) the objective is to comprehend the texts of academic content by activating prior knowledge, making use of academic content, scaffolding instruction, cultivating critical tninking, and organizing information. Then, Reading for Academic Purposes is designed to measure the level of English language proficiency of students especially in reading comprehension skill. It provides wide variety of skills and abilities in English through TOEFL practice and IELTS for preparing students to get much experience in reading authentic academic passage.

T1 suggested to take care of the students basic ability in developing the course learning outcomes. He reminded that the students basic competences are unknown since they did not pass the proficiency test of English. They enrolled in the study program because they passed the general test to enter the university. He mentioned some alternatives for drawing reading learning outcomes whether based on skill, on genre, or in topic.

He emphasized about Barret taxonomy as basis. The reason is because it is measurable. Barret taxonomy was originally designed to assisst classroom teachers in developing comprehension question and/or test question for reading (http://joebyrne.net/curriculum/barrett.pdf). There are five main categories in the taxonomy. They are literal comprehension, reorganisation, inferential comprehension, evaluation, and appreciation. By considering the students basic

ability, T1 open a question whether the learning outcomes covered all five categories or only covering the first four categories, genre based or skill based.

T6 agreed with the idea to develop basic reading skills in Reading for General Purpose course. It is task based course and reading is for real life task. She proposed an idea of integrating all language skills. She said that when reading for summary, reader integrate reading and writing. But, she herself rejected it by saying that it is not appropriate in this time being because there are so many things to be revised, if the idea to be adopted.

T2 proposed literal, inferensial, and critical comprehension as the minimum outcome. The evaluative ability is still a dream, she said. This is similar with the idea of T5. And T6 suggested to put evaluative category in literature courses. Then, T2 added developing the reading habit as the learning outcomes. Based on her experience in teaching, the students are lack of reading habit. And this lack affect the development of other reading competences. This idea is in line with the research being conducted which particularly pay attention to the students reading habit as the base for developing the reading course syllabus.

There was no objection to this idea from other participants. They agree with reading as complex skills and the learning outcomes must be measurable and the habit of reading must be developed. But how to divide them into three courses? It remains unanswered.

T6 discussed about Reading for academic Purpose. She disagree with the learning outcome stated in the old version of the course syllabus that is to measure the students proficiency through TOEFL and IELTS. She said IELTS model may be adopted for developing real life task, but not for testing the learners. Those test is only tools for measurement, not the objective. In addition, having the TOEFL test score is an obligation for each Jambi University students. The reading course is the way to develop their strategy and comprehension. Different from it, T5 said she will follow the learning outcomes written in the old syllabus.

The discussion then continued with the course title. By its title, Reading for General Purpose and Reading for Academic Purpose descriptively show the outcomes of taking the course. Different from both courses, Reading for Professional Purposes (in the old syllabus it is written Reading for Professional Context) does not clearly describe what profession is intended. If it is not general and academic, what profession does it mean? Teacher is academic contect. Or, does it mean non-teaching? The question remains unanswered although the participants agree with the descriptiveness of the title.

T6 conluded that basic reading competences for real life task must be developed. And it means students have to develop their critical thinking. Because in digital era there are abundants of information that have to be read critically. And because Universitas Jambi is usually the last choice of the students, perseverance on both side of the teacher and learner is a must.

Reading Learning Activities:

Providing a completely comprehensive account of how reading is currently taught is not possible. There may be as many ways to teach reading comprehension as there are reading.

T2 mentioned about reading learning experiences in her class. She frequently found a copy and paste strategy applied by the students. She can see this when the students write the answer of reading tasks. One student answer the task, and the student's friend copy and paste it. It seems like a collaborative learning, helping each other, but it is not. The teacher should find strategy to overcome this situation.

T3 explained about changing of her belief in teaching reading and the impact to way she teach. The first time she taught reading, for about half of a semester she used to think that reading means answering questions. She felt uneasy. Then, she realizes that people read not because they are asked for. In real life people read because they have purpose. And for that purpose reader should have strategies. She gave an example reading for a recipe. People usually read recipes because they want to practice it. It is reading by doing. This explanation implied that as a reading teacher she has developed her own strategy in teaching reading.

Talking about digital era, T3 suggested any teacher to approach learning sources of z-generation by applying critical reading and critical thinking. She also told about variation of teaching learning activities.

T4 shared her experiences about the strategy of teaching reading. She applied TOEFL and IELTS strategy like reading the questions before reading the text to get the idea. When taking the proficiency tests, test taker read because they want to pass the test and not because they want to answer the question. This imply that students have to have purpose in reading.

She often face students complaining about difficult vocabularies, and the length of the text to be read. She suggested the students to read a lot and apply reading strategies. To avoid copy and paste, she minimize group works. She emphasizes about teaching self and responsible character to the students. Variation of teaching strategy is her way to overcome the problem about students interest.

A different strategy was explained by T5. She has her own strategy in teaching reading. She said that she prefer direct presentation so that the students have responsibilities with what they read. When a student presents, the rest of the class pay attention to it, so that they can focus. It is a kind of cooperative learning, she said. Then, this part will be followed by an individual test. The task of a reading teacher only facilitating, adding, revising, and observing.

T1 added a strategy in teaching that he think will be able to overcome the unable to read comprehensively students. Teacher have to push the students to reach the limit. Combine formal learning inside the classroom and informal learning outside the classroom. He said that the credit system (SKS system) does not work well. As a result, teachers have to work harder.

T9 talked about integrated approach in teaching reading. Nevertheless, she did not further explain her idea.

Reading Learning Sources:

So far, some of the participant teachers taught the course based on reading coursebook available. The reading coursebook such as *Interaction* written by Elaine Kirn and Pamela Hartman was being used. Some of them vary the sources with other forms of sources, such as journals and online texts.

T3 told about her coursebook approach. She used a commercial reading book and then follow the flow of the book. She also had a problem with the students reading habit. They are reluctant to read. So, she suggested to write course materials that enhance the students reading habit.

T4 talked about old book as reading source, and T 8 talk about books and journals. While, T1 explained that texts changed, printed book is not really needed. In the digital era, just show the students the site address and then they will find and read. However, based on the experience of T10, only certain students will read the site address because of lack of packet data, lazy, or uninterested in; and some students told that they prefer reading printed books than e-book. Other problem with reading online is unfocus attention. Reader easily switch attention from one topic to another or from a journal to a game, and forget the main objective of his or her reading. Self-control is needed.

Conclusion

All teachers agree with students directed learning, variative ways of teaching, and with online and offline combination as the reading source materials. This paper is not an end of itself. There are some more data needed to reconstruct the reading syllabus. They are data from the students themselves.

References

Acheaw, O. M. 2014. Reading Habits Among Students and its Effect on Academic Performance: A Study of Students of Koforidua Polytechnic. Library Phylosophy and Practice (e-journal), paper 1130

Adnan, Ali et all. *Identification of Factors Promoting Reading Habits of Students: A Case Study on Pakistan.* Research on Humanities and Social Sciences, vol. 6 no. 17 2016 ISSN 2225-0484

Akarsu, O. & Dariyemez., T. 2014. *The Reading Habits of University Students Studying English Language and Literature in Digital Age*. Journal of language and linguistic studies, 10 (2), 85-99

Applegate and Applegate. 2004. *The Peter Effect: Reading habits and Attitudes of Preservice Teachers.* International Reading Association, pp 554-563

Carter, Ronald & Nunan, David (Ed.). 2001. *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Goria, Speicher, and Stollhans. 2016. *Innovative Language teaching and Learning at University;Enhancing Participation and Collaboration.* Dublin, Research Publishing Net

Hyland, Ken (Ed.). 2006. *English for Academic Purposes: An Advanced Resource Book.* London: Routledge

Iftanti 2012. *A Survey of the English Reading Habit of EFL Students in Indonesia.*TEFLIN Journal, Vol. 23 no.2, July 2012

Javed, et all. 2015. *Developing Reading Comprehension Modules to Facilitate Reading Comprehension among Malaysian Secondary School ESL Students.* International Journal of Instruction vol 8 no2 July 2015 e-ISSN:1308-1470, p 139-154

Krueger, Richard A. 2002. *Designing and Conducting Focus group Interviews.* University of Minnesota

Mikulecky, Beatrice S. 2011. *A Short Course in Teaching Reading.* New York; Pearson

Mlay, Samali V. Et all. 2015. *Uncovering Reading Habits of University Students in Uganda: Does ICT matter?* International Journal of Education and Development using Information and Communication Technology *(IJEDICT),* 2015, Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 38-50

Molchanova, Irma Iorevna. 2015. *Influence of the Internet in Studying English.* International Education Studies , v8 n1, p133-141

Richey, Rita C dan Klein, James D. 2005. *Developmental Research Method:Creating Knowledge from Instructional Design and Development Practice.* Journal of Computing for Higher Education. Vol 16(2), 23-38

Shen, Li-Bi. 2006. *Computer Technology and College Students' Reading Habit.* Chia-Nan annual bulletin Vol. 32, pp. 559－572

Syafitri, Elsa E. 2016. *English Reading Habit of Third Semester Students of English Education Study Program in Digital Era at Jambi University.* Unpublished thesis

Warschauer, M and Healey,D. 1998. *Computers and Language Learning.* United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press

Warschauer, M et all. 2011.*Transforming Digital Reading with Visual-Text Formatting.* JALTCALLjournal vol 7 no 3 ISSN 1832-4215