

PENGARUH LATAR BELAKANG PENGETAHUAN PEMBELAJAR TERHADAP PEMAHAMAN TEKS BAHASA INGGRIS

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Abstrak. Penelitian ini membahas dampak intervensi instruksional untuk membangun, mengaktifkan, dan mengatur pengetahuan latar yang dimiliki orang pembelajar dewasa dalam konteks EFL pada saat memahami teks berbahasa Inggris. Dalam aktivitas membaca, metode-metode yang berbedamungkin diterapkan. Membaca teks karya ilmiah tentu saja berbeda dari membaca cadangan tujuan kesenangan atau membaca berita. Untuk memahami isi dan pesannya suatu teks, pengetahuan bahasa seperti tata bahasa dan kosakata saja tidaklah cukup. Pengetahuan akademik dan pengetahuan latar pembaca mengenai topik yang sedang dibaca juga merupakan faktor penting untuk memahami teks. Artikel ini dimaksudkan untuk mendiskusikan pentingnya intervensi instruksional dalam rangka membantu pembaca membangun, mengaktifkan, dan menata pengetahuannya akan topik dalam upaya memahami suatu teks. Oleh karena itu pembaca dapat mencapai suatu pemahaman teks setelah diberi intervensi instruksional akan membangun, mengaktifkan, dan menghubungkan pengetahuan latar. Intervensi instruksional tersebut diberikan untuk membantu peserta membangun, mengaktifkan, dan menata pengetahuannya.

Kata kunci: intervensi instruksional, pengetahuan latar

THE INFLUENCE OF AN EFL ADULT LEARNER'S PRIOR KNOWLEDGE IN COMPREHENDING ENGLISH TEXTS

Abstract. This study discussed the impacts of instructional interventions in building, activating, and organizing an EFL adult learner's background knowledge in comprehending texts. In reading texts, different methods may be applied. Reading scientific texts will be different from reading for leisure or reading news. To understand the content and message of the text, knowledge of language like grammar and vocabularies is not enough. The knowledge of the world or readers' background knowledge of the topic is the other important aspects in comprehending text. This article is aimed at discussing the importance of instructional interventions in helping readers to build, activate, and organize her prior knowledge on the topic in comprehending English texts. Therefore the readers can attain comprehension after instructional interventions on building, activating and relating background knowledge are given. Those instructional interventions are given to help the participant build, activate, and organize her background knowledge.

Key words: *instructional intervention, background knowledge or prior knowledge*

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental ideas of the role of reader's prior knowledge in comprehension are not new. It has been started since the era of the origin of educational, psychological and philosophical thought (Wilson and Anderson, in Orasanu, 1986, p.31). The term background knowledge then is known as schema. This term was firstly used by psychologist Bartlett in 1932 and it has a significant role on the research in the areas of speech processing and language comprehension. In addition the idea of prior knowledge and experience is kept in the brain as schemata. that specific memories are reconstructed at the occasion of recollection on the basis of schemata (Wilson and Anderson, in Orasanu, 1986, p.31).

Schema theory proposed that our knowledge and expectations of the world will influence our understanding of new information. In reading, background knowledge will help the readers in constructing the message of texts. It is as stated by Nunan (1999, p.257), that the basic principle in schema theory is that the texts themselves do not carry the meaning.

They only provide signposts or clues to be employed by the readers in reconstructing the writer's original messages. So in the process of comprehension, the readers must be active. They have to think while they are reading in order to catch the meaning of the text.

In addition to comprehending the message or topic of the text, readers need to know that their prior knowledge is relevant to the subject and reason they are reading. However in some cases, what the students are thinking is not relevant to the topic of the text. As a consequence, they need to activate their relevant knowledge. Caldwell and Leslie (2005, p. 95) stated that knowledge activation is the process of being aware of knowledge related to the topic. Moreover a teacher has to assess the students' prior knowledge to determine whether their knowledge is appropriate or adequate to the new information or the topic of the text. Meanwhile the students to be a proficient in reading have to do five principles concerning the process of comprehension. They are the students have to select which schema is useful to understand the

text, use the schema relating to the text, use schema to infer information implicitly stated in the text, connect ideas to each other and to prior knowledge, and remember information through recalling the schema (adapted from Rycik & Irvin, 2005, p. 21 – 22). In a classroom context schema theory will help teacher to understand students' understanding of a particular text (Rumelhart, 1984 in Rycik & Irvin, 2005, p. 22). In conjunction to that idea, a teacher may apply a pre-reading and post-reading comprehension method of assessment relating to students' prior knowledge. Pre-reading assessment is important to see the readiness of the students to the new information/topic while post-reading assessment is essential to know the relevance of students' background knowledge to new information.

This article is triggered by the assumption that many English learners failed to comprehend text because: they don't have background knowledge of the topic of the text, or they are not able to activate their background knowledge, or they can activate their background knowledge but failed to relate or organize it. I am

thus concerned with the evaluating of the influence of instructional intervention at building, activating, and organizing background knowledge to help comprehending the texts. Referring to the introduction, the question is formulated as follow: *Do instructional interventions help readers to build, activate, and organize their prior knowledge on the topic which further help comprehension?*

This research is aimed at: *Finding the relationship between the instructional interventions given to the readers in building, activating, and organizing their background knowledge to English text comprehension.*

This article is significant for the foreign language learners and teachers in learning and teaching process of foreign language reading. For the second language learners, this provides the concept of the importance of background knowledge to comprehend new information or the topic of texts. While for second or foreign language teachers it suggests that instructional intervention such as building and activating background knowledge is essential to help students understand the message of the

texts. Therefore they have to encourage their students to be able to build, activate and relate their background knowledge to the reading text assigned.

Schema theory explains how our existing knowledge influences comprehension. Wilson and Anderson cited in Orasanu (1986, p.36) stated that a schema is an abstract structure of knowledge, in which structure refers to the relations among constituent concepts and abstract in the sense that it may cover a number of different particular texts. Meanwhile Widdowson (1983) cited in Singhal (2006, p. 95) stated that schema has been described as cognitive constructs which allow for the organization of information in long-term memory. In addition Cook (1989, p.69) in Singhal (2006, p. 95) mentioned that the mind stimulated by key words or phrases in the text or by the context, activates knowledge of schema. Both of them stress the cognitive characteristics of schema which relates the new information to known information. And a reader will comprehend a message whenever she/he can activate

or construct a schema that relates to the objects or events described (Wilson & Anderson in Orasanu, 1986, p.33).

The work of Anderson and Pearson (1984) and Rumelhart (1980) in A schema-theoretic view of basic progress in reading comprehension cited in Braunger and Lewis (2006, p. 60) has proved the importance of prior knowledge in reading. According to this view, readers understand what they read only if it relates to what they already know. Because the message of text is sometimes implicit, readers must draw from their prior knowledge in order to understand it (Braunger & Lewis, 2006, p.60).

Meanwhile Sweet (1993) cited in Braunger and Lewis (2006, p. 60) proposed that prior knowledge should be seen in two ways: the overall prior knowledge and specific prior knowledge. The first represents the sum of knowledge individuals have acquired as a result of their in and out of school experiences. Later, indicates the particular information an individual needs to understand text relating to a certain topic. This

knowledge is divided into text-specific knowledge (knowledge of text type) and topic-specific knowledge (knowledge about the topic).

A reader can comprehend a message whenever she is able to activate or construct a schema that gives a good explanation of the object and event describe. Therefore schema is necessary to comprehend a text.

According to schema theory, reading relates to more or less simultaneous analysis at any different levels from textual to the experience-based levels of knowledge of specific content (Wilson and Anderson in Orasanu, 1986, p. 35). In other word, the reading process does not mean strictly runs from textual levels to text interpretation. It tends to be an interactive process between the reader and the text where the reader is required to match the clues in the text to his or her background knowledge (Nunan, 1999, p.257).

In addition to schema theory, the process of interpretation is guided by the principle that every input is mapped against the existing schema and all aspects of schema must fit with

the input information. Based on this principle, the two basic types of information processing are recognized, the bottom-up and top-down (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988, P. 84 cited in Nunan, 1999, p. 258). The first process which is also known as data driven refers to decoding the smallest element such as phonemes and graphemes first, and using them to decode and interpret words, clauses, sentences, and then the whole text (Nunan, 1999, p.302). While the later process which is also called conceptually driven regards to the use of background knowledge to interpret the text (Nunan, 1999, p. 316).

The importance of a schema in comprehending text, as Anderson, (1983), Anderson and Pichert, (1978, Anderson, Spiro, and Anderson, (1978) cited in Wilson and Anderson in Orasanu, (1986, p.35 -36) mentioned that a schema provides ideational scaffolding, directs allocation of attention, enables inferential elaboration, allows orderly searches of memory, facilitates editing, and permits inferential reconstruction. Meanwhile Rycik and

Irvin (2004, p.21) illustrated five principles in order for the readers to comprehend the text. They are: selecting a schema which will be useful to understand the text, using a schema that is important in the text, using schema to infer information, connecting ideas to prior knowledge and recalling the schema to remember information.

Based on all the facts that background knowledge and prior knowledge are critical to reading process, it is important for teachers to understand and build on the range of background knowledge which students bring to school. Background knowledge can be provided in classroom through a variety of experiences, including teacher read-alouds, discussion during and prior and following reading, written response to what has been read, and access to many books and reading materials. Allington & Cunningham (1996), Sweet (1993) cited in Braunger and Lewis (2006, p.60) mentioned that the more students read and write, the more their knowledge grows, which in turn strengthen their

ability to construct meaning as they read.

Hence the effectiveness of instruction in ESL reading classroom can be seen from how instruction given helps learners to build, activate, and organize background knowledge.

1. Building up students' background knowledge

Background knowledge can be built through media such as watching film relating the topic, providing pictures or graphs, and analogies such as relating personal experience to the concept in reading. As Rycik and Irvin (2004, p. 24) stated that whenever the students have little knowledge relating to the material they read, the teacher can help them build their knowledge through media.

2. Activating students' prior knowledge

This step can be done through brainstorming activities. Brainstorming allows a high degree of students since there is no wrong answer. They can also build students' confidence by showing students that they already know something about the topic of their reading and arouse curiosity

about how various ideas may appear in the text (Rycik and Irvin, 2004, p. 25).

3. Organizing students' background knowledge

To do this stage, students are encouraged to use graphic organizers. Graphic organizers are visual representations of knowledge, a way of structuring information, and a way of arranging essential aspects of a topic into a pattern using label (Bromley, Irwin-DelVitis, & Modlo, 1995 in Eqan, 1999 on line journal). In addition Flood and Lapp (1988) cited in Eqan (1999, on line journal) use the term "mapping" to describe any illustrative materials that help students learn from text. Forte and Schurr (1997, p. 5) defined graphic organizers are all learning aids whose effectiveness depends upon the visual organization of information and they are easier to understand block of text. Some examples of graphic organizers are: cause and effect chain, compare and contrast chart, compare and contrast diagram, cycle graph, fact and fiction position statement, fishbone model, flowchart, and venn diagram (adapted from Forte and Schurr (1997,

p. 53 – 56). Meanwhile Alvermann (1986) cited in Rycik and Irvin (2004, p. 25) mentioned that graphic organizers provide a means of helping readers distinguish main idea from supporting ideas.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses two subchapter: data analysis and discussion. The analysis contains instructional interventions and the result of analysis. The discussion describes the overall result of intervention.

Data Analysis

Instructional Interventions

The instructional interventions in this project are aimed at building, and activating English learners' background knowledge and also helping to connect and organize ideas.

1. Building participant's background knowledge

Analogies can be used to build background knowledge. The analogies are used to compare the learners' experience or familiarity of the object with the ideas in the text. It

refers to Vacca and Vacca's (1999) in Rycik and Irvin (2004, p.25) recommendation that teacher should create such analogies for students to read and discuss before they read a difficult text.

In relation to the lesson plan of intervention, the first and second sequence instructions are intended to build background knowledge. The first step is introducing the topic of the text. It is conducted by telling the topic of the text. Then initiating the topic introduction through asking her whether learners have been familiar with the topic or not.

The next step is trying to help constructing analogy. For example in this procedure, teacher instructed language learners to imagine the topic with the fact they have known, then retell the topic.

2. Activating participant's background knowledge

It is done using brainstorming activity. This activity is conducted through mind mapping. This mind mapping will encourage the language learners to generate the ideas relating to the topic. It will build the learners'

confidence. Pre-questioning is also provided to help activating learners' prior knowledge.

Brainstorming is done in the third step of lesson procedures, where the language learners are required to generate any ideas relating to topic with the teacher's assistance. In this activity teacher sometimes asked learners questions to generate ideas.

3. Organizing participant's background knowledge

Helping language learners to connect and organize ideas. It is conducted with the assumption that the language learners still need help to organize and connect their background knowledge. This can be in the form of graphic organizer showing cause and effect, compare and contrast or chronological order relation.

As the ideas of the topic mention on mind map, the following intervention is conducted to organize all the ideas. It can be through cause and effect or compare and contrast.

Discussion

The analysis indicated that instructional interventions to build,

activate, and organize background knowledge before assigning the participant to do reading comprehension do appear improve comprehension.

The learners comprehension is attained after the instructional interventions relating to learners' background knowledge have been given. The basic reason is that participant's background knowledge helps to relate to new information in the text to construct meaning. Information processing is not merely translating information from physical stimuli to a symbolic mental representation (Bruning, et. al., 2004, p. 17). Kintsch (1998) cited in Bruning, et. al. (2004, p. 17) stated that nearly all information in the process. Meaning is constructed on the basis of prior knowledge and the context of the text. However much of meaning construction happens in short-term memory.

The language learners' prior knowledge will directly influence the perception of the text message. This perception is built from the information in the text such as the main idea and supporting ideas, and

the relation among ideas within the text and outside the text such as the context of the text and the participant's prior knowledge. Mandler (1984) cited in Bruning, et. al. (2004, p. 22) mentioned that knowledge permits perception to occur and guides our perception of new information. When the participant is able to relate information in the text and her own prior knowledge, comprehension will be easily achieved.

In some cases an appropriate schema seems to be activated due to the result of pattern recognition process. Moreover the activation of a schema results mainly from the analysis of an environmental event or context where and when the event happens. Hence it can be concluded that perception is a relative rather than absolute (Bruning, et. al, 2004, p. 23). In conjunction with this theory, a lesson plan which consists of sequence of instructional intervention is given to activate participant's background knowledge relevant to the topic of text.

Background knowledge is concerned with the learners' memory, especially long-term memory. And the success of activating prior knowledge

will also be determined by how learners are able to retrieve their long term-memory. The process of retrieval is closely related to encoding. It is as mentioned in Bruning, et. al (2004, p. 93) that remembering knowledge is enhanced whenever the conditions at retrieval match those present at encoding. If such a match happens, the contextual cues help students perform an efficient search of memory. Therefore to create a richer context for retrieval, in the instructional intervention elaborative interrogation is implicitly applied.

In conjunction with retrieval, reconstruction is also required. In this case the language uses prior knowledge to reconstruct a reasonable response.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

Based on the result of analysis it can be concluded that language learners can attain higher comprehension after instructional instructions are given. Those instructional instructions are given to help the language learners build,

activate, and organize their background knowledge.

Building knowledge may help create and build the unknown topic or message through discussing the new topic with some assistance from the expert. Activating background knowledge may happen whenever the learners have ever known the topic. Therefore the instruction may be given through recalling or remembering.

While relating background knowledge can be done by connecting old information to the new information. Some activities that may help language learners to build, activate and relate background knowledge are: questioning, analogies, brainstorming, and graphic organizers.

Recommendation

For the teachers, It is recommended for the teachers to provide prior activities or instructional interventions before assigning the students to comprehend reading texts. They can be realized in the form of prior questioning, analogies, brainstorming, and graphic organizers. They are also encourage not to only

focus on the linguistic text structure like grammar and vocabularies.

For the readers, It is advised to build, activate and relate their prior knowledge of the world to the new knowledge.

For book authors, They are suggested to make reading text by creating pre reading questions or activities which may help the students or readers comprehend the texts.

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