

# STUDENTS' READING ABILITY AND PROBLEMS IN ANSWERING QUESTIONS OF RECOUNT AND NARRATIVE TEXTS AT GRADE VIII OF SMP 33 PADANG

*Arlina, Jufrizal, Yenni Rozimela*  
*Language Education Program, State University of Padang*

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan kemampuan membaca siswa tentang teks recount dan narrative serta menganalisis kesulitan atau masalah yang mereka hadapi dalam menjawab pertanyaan berdasarkan teks tersebut. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian deskriptif. Populasi dalam penelitian ini adalah siswa kelas VIII SMP 33 Padang tahun akademik 2011/2012 dengan sample sebanyak 46 siswa. Data dikumpulkan melalui tes membaca dan wawancara. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kemampuan siswa dalam memahami teks recount dan naratif masih rendah, yang terlihat dari skor yang diperoleh siswa. Banyak siswa yang memperoleh nilai di bawah KKM. Penelitian ini juga mengungkapkan masalah yang dihadapi siswa dalam membaca, yaitu bahasa, kosakata, indikator membaca dan jenis kata tanya. Berdasarkan hasil penelitian dapat disimpulkan bahwa kemampuan siswa dalam memahami teks recount dan narrative masih rendah disebabkan oleh kurangnya pengetahuan siswa tentang faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi pemahaman dalam membaca teks tersebut.

**Kata Kunci:** Reading ability, Problems, Answering questions, Recount text, Narrative text

## Introduction

This article is derived from the research of the thesis entitled "Students' reading ability and problems in answering questions of recount and narrative texts at grade VIII of SMP 33 Padang". There are some problems namely (1). Language problems (2) Vocabulary problems (3) Text types, the purposes and the generic structures of the texts and (4) types of questions and reading comprehension indicators. In this article, there are two main problems;

language problems and vocabulary problems.

As one of English skills, reading requires the students to have good vocabulary, grammar and strategies in order to understand texts resulting in reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is the process of transferring ideas from texts to the reader's mind, or the process in which students understand and get the messages from the printed words. The more the students read, the better their comprehension on the reading material will be. Grellet (1998) says "Understanding a written text means

extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible". Grellet emphasizes the importance of obtaining the required information in reading Comprehension refers to an active mental process. When one reads something, he actively goes along to comprehend what the writer's intended message is by predicting, evaluating, selecting significant details, organizing, etc. In this case, a crucial factor that influences comprehension is the importance of the reader's background knowledge.

In addition, Murcia (2001: 213) says:

Comprehending reading matters involves the correct association of meaning with word, symbols, the evaluating of meanings which are suggested in context, the selection of the correct meaning, the organization of ideas as they are read, the retention of these ideas and their use in some present or future activity.

Comprehension takes place while the person is reading and it needs a set of skills that let him find information and understand it in terms of what is already known. If the learners do not have background knowledge of the text they read, sufficient vocabulary and knowledge of grammar, it is difficult for them to comprehend a text.

Furthermore, to be able to comprehend the texts, the students should be able to understand individual words, phrases, clauses,

sentences, paragraphs, and larger units of text. In other words, the students should have sufficient vocabulary as an ultimate point to comprehend a text. They need to comprehend what those words in a text means as a whole. Similarly, vocabulary load is the most significant predictor of text difficulty as Haynes and Baker (1993 in Shen,2008:135) said that the most significant handicap for L2 readers is not lack of reading strategies but insufficient vocabulary in English. Thus, well mastered vocabulary is substantial part of comprehension.

In addition, in L1 reading, the effects of linguistic features in text is more commonly investigated since it is assumed that the first-language readers already have basic syntactic and semantic knowledge. Thus, research into linguistic knowledge has concentrated on vocabulary size and metalinguistic knowledge (Read,2000). However, structural knowledge has been shown to have a facilitative effect on reading (Garnham,1985;Perfetti,1989; Rayner,1990; Cited in Alderson,2000).

In second language reading, the situation is quite different. Students begin reading in L2 with a different language base than they had when starting to read in their first language. Most first-language readers know have several thousand words before they begin to read, and they have some ability to handle the basic grammar of their own. The second language readers do not have any of those advantages. Therefore, they may have many problems in understanding the text they read. According to Cooper ( 1984 in Alderson,2000), without sufficient lexical knowledge, L2 readers showed substantial

inability to use linguistic cues in the large context in order to deduce meaning and to recognize lexical relationships and meaning relationships between sentences.

The process of teaching and learning the reading skill at the eighth grade students of Junior High School 33 Padang dealt with some problems. The first one is about the language problems. Many students felt unable to comprehend the text. Most of the students seemed to have difficulties in understanding texts. They were not able to give correct answers to the questions provided. From the mid and semester tests, it seems that the students have problems in comprehending structures. They have no idea of how to distinguish between regular verbs and irregular verbs. They failed to answer the questions of the reading texts because they cannot figure out what kind of verbs appeared in the questions (in simple present tense) and verbs appeared in the reading text (in simple past tense).

The eighth of grade students have problems in answering questions of recount and narrative texts since they do not have good knowledge in understanding grammar or structures which are used in those texts. Especially in recount and narrative texts, the students are required to understand about simple past tense, present perfect tense and past continuous tense. The students get confuse how to differ those tenses. Besides that, they are not able to determine the verbs in the past and in the present. For example, the verbs used in the texts are “went”, “swam”, “played”. While in the questions, the verbs will be changed into “go”,

“swim” and “play”. Thus, this will make students get confuse and misunderstand in answering the questions of a text.

The second problem is the students have lack of vocabulary. Most of them failed to answer the questions of the texts since they do not have sufficient vocabulary and failed to figure out the meaning of the words. In fact, vocabulary knowledge has been long recognized to be crucial in first language reading. Research by Liu and Nation (1985), and Laufer (1989) shows that readers need to know 95 % of the words in text to gain adequate comprehension and to be able to guess unknown words from context. Hirsh and Nation (1992) estimate that in order to be familiar with 97 % of the words in a text, a reader needs a vocabulary of roughly 5,000 words. Readers familiar with only the 2,000 words most frequent words of English, as compiled by West in his general Service List will only understand roughly of the words in the text.

### **Method**

This research was a descriptive one since it is aimed at describing and investigating various educational problems that occurred in the field. The purpose of this research was to get information about a phenomenon to which existed in the field. In this research, the researcher describes what problems were faced by the eighth grade students at SMPN 33 Padang in answering questions based on recount and narrative texts. There were 46 students which would be the sample of this research by using random sampling technique. The advantage of random sampling is that it is the best way to obtain a

representative sample (Gay, 2009:125)

In this research, the researcher used two kinds of instruments; they are a reading comprehension test and an interview. To make the test more valid, it was built around some indicators of reading comprehension of recount and narrative texts which are based on *School Based Curriculum* (2006). The indicators are general information, specific information, meaning of words, grammatical features, and generic structure of the text.

Tape recorder was used in interviewing the students. Based on the guidelines of interview, the researcher asked the students about the problems they had in answering the questions of recount and narrative texts, and tried to dig further information about the problems they had. After that, the students' answers were grouped based on the problems into language problems, vocabulary problems, reading indicator and type of questions problems. The interview data supported the data of the students' ability in answering questions of recount and narrative texts.

## Findings and Discussions

### 1. Findings

The students' ability in answering the questions of recount and narrative texts was categorized low. There are two main problems faced by the students when they were asked to answer questions of recount and narrative texts namely the meaning of words and the language used in the texts. Since they had limited vocabulary, they didn't understand the sentences used in the texts and the questions also. They also had problems in recognizing past

tenses, especially verbs used in that kind of tenses.

## 2. Discussions

### a. Language Problems

Most of the students have problems in understanding grammar or structure which are used in recount and narrative texts. Most of them didn't know the meaning of almost whole sentences in the passage since they lack of grammar of "past forms". Besides that, they tend to say forget about the tenses used in the texts. It may caused by they are not motivated yet. Perhaps they did not focus while they were learning a structure, or the media was not interesting for them. From this on, teachers can develop exercises which encourage learners to notice or to practice particular language structures. It is important to check that the learners understand the meaning of the language they are studying by monitoring the use of their language both in spoken and written

The teachers can use *concept questions* too. For example, to check the use of the past tense to talk about a schedule event in the past we need to check that the learners understand whether the sentences refer to the past, present or future. Another way of helping learners to understand the meaning of a structure is to provide a background situation. The situation can be introduced in a variety of ways including using pictures, a dialogue, a short text and real objects. (Lindsay, Knight, 2006).

Therefore, English teachers need to use various media and teaching method in teaching a structure since learning structure is

more difficult rather than learning vocabulary. By using interactive and interesting media and also appropriate texts and activities to practice particular language structure, the students will be motivated and feel enjoy. In addition, it is important for the teachers to know as much as possible about the language that they are teaching. The language system is complex and learners need to be guided to learn it.

### **b. Vocabulary Problems**

Cooper (in Alderson 2000) states that without sufficient lexical knowledge, the readers show substantial inability to use linguistic cues in the large context in order to deduce meaning and to recognize lexical relationships and meaning relationship between sentences. It can be said that students with insufficient vocabulary will surely fail to draw meaning from sentences and paragraphs that build a text including a recount and a narrative.

To get better comprehension of a text, the students not only need sufficient vocabulary knowledge but also good reading skills. The results of the research conducted by Amir in 2009 show that in a TOEFL test, students faced problems in reading because they do not possess good reading skills. In line with Amir's, this research has also proven that one of the problems that the students faced in reading a recount and a narrative text is that they do not possess good reading skills. They only expect the vocabulary to help them read. In other words, they try to comprehend the text through an 'each-word' translation without considering the context found within the text, such as

translating the meaning of how in "How are you?", how in "How do you do?" and how in "How do you go to school?". This habit will not help improve the students' comprehension because if they do not recognize one word in the text, they will find the text difficult and they will sometimes misunderstand the text as well as the questions given to them.

It is clear that students need to be taught about teaching vocabulary since it will help them to improve their reading comprehension of a text. In addition, students need to have sufficient vocabulary in guessing a meaning of word. Without having it, the context clue technique will be useless. Thus, the teaching of vocabulary need to be integrated in teaching reading. Students need to learn and get exercises in developing their vocabulary and to get reinforcement about the vocabulary they have. Vocabulary knowledge and grammar are the 'perfect couple' to gain better comprehension of a text including a recount and a narrative text. To guess successfully from context, learners need to know 19 out of 20 words (95 %) of a text, which requires learning 3.000 most common words (Nation, 1990). However, most of the eighth grade students claimed that they were unable to answer the questions since they could not understand the text and the difficult words found in the text although they have tried guessing their meanings from its context. This happened because they had very limited vocabulary also. To be a good reader, the students, thus, need to own both of them.

There are many ways of helping learners understand the

meaning of a word or phrase. The teacher can translate the word from English into the L1, or by giving them examples of the difficult word, or providing an explanation or definition in English. At last, tell them to look up the word either in a monolingual or bilingual dictionary. The learners need to know the meaning of similar words. For example, “work” and how they are used. Both refer to something that we do to earn money, but “job” suggests something that is more regular. In addition, teachers can help learners understand the meaning with the use of visual representations. For example, to understand “how” we refer to time we can use time lines. For a structure we need to provide a context which illustrates the meaning clearly. For example, to explain one meaning of the past continuous we could give the context of someone talking about something they did in the past and the background to that event or action.

### Conclusions

Reading in the student native language is definitely different from the foreign language. In their native language, it is believed that students easily comprehend the text they read, as they are familiar with the vocabulary and grammatical rules used. Reading in the foreign language requires them of adequate knowledge of the language, which has a different vocabulary and grammatical system. In this case, it is necessary to prepare student to read with understanding each new unit of reading lesson. Thus, teacher is in an important role in choosing appropriate reading materials for the students.

### Suggestions

It is advisable for the English teachers to learn about how to teach grammar and vocabulary to the students effectively and sufficiently. They also should be selective in choosing the appropriate reading materials.

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