A MODEL FOR TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION AT JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

Ermita
SMP Negeri 13 Padang

Abstract

This article reveals an alternative model for teaching reading comprehension at junior high school. This model is a combination of 'interactive mdel' and 'cognitive mode'. The discussion covers two levels of reading comprehension: the lowest level (literal comprehension) and the highest level (evaluation and appreciation). There are four trainings given dealing with these levels; (1) literal comprehension training, (2) inferential comprehension training, (3) evaluation training, and (4) appreciation training. The last coverage of this article is about the advantages of proposed model. This model is designed and hopefully will be useful for language teachers who are training or planning to train learners to have good reading comprehension strategies, particularly at junior high school .

Key Words: *model, reading comprehension, interactive, cognitive training*

A. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, the teaching of English language has become a central attention for at least two reasons. First, English is now the only foreign language which should be taught as a compulsory school subject at high schools and universities. Other foreign languages, if any, are only offered for certain fields of study. Second, as the first foreign language, English is one out of three school subjects being tested at the national examination. The latest shows that this language is very important in this country.

The Indonesian curriculum acknowledges that there are four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and two language components (grammar and vocabulary) that should be mastered by the students. A lot of discussions, seminars, and workshops have been addressed to the problems of teaching and learning those two main domains. Besides, a great number of books, articles, and research, reading comprehensions have also been introduced to bring new angles of visions and thoughts. However, it is believed that information, debates, thoughts about this will never end.

This paper will be focused on discussing my own experience as an English teacher at junior high school in Padang in teaching reading comprehension. In writing this paper, I personally believe that developing reading skills of the students has been one of the centers of discussion among teachers and scholars in Indonesia. In addition, I also believe that theories about reading and theories about teaching techniques of reading comprehension have influenced the teaching practices at any school levels. By the believes, I propose an alternative model for teaching reading comprehension skills to Junior and Senior High School students in Indonesia. This paper begins with discussion of some theoretical backgrounds in part one. Part two presents the step by step procedures of the model for teaching reading comprehension skill. At last, part three discusses the advantages and features of this model of teaching reading comprehension.

1. The Basic Concepts of Reading Comprehension

According to Goodman (1988) and Grabe (1988) reading is a receptive language process. It is a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs.' In this process there is the process of recognition, interpretation, and perception of written or printed material.

There is an interaction between language and thought in reading.

In addition, reading is a process of communication from the writer to the reader. It involves the recognition of letters, words, phrases, and clauses, and in some respects, it can be considered a simpler process than comprehension (McWhorter 1992). He also explains that comprehension, on the other hand, is a process of negotiating understanding between the reader and the writer. It is a more complex psychological process and includes linguistic factors, such as phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic elements, in addition to cognitive and emotional factors. The reader receives information from the author via the words, sentences, paragraphs, and so forth, and tries to understand the inner feelings of the writer.

Referring to Jacobus (1999), in the reading process, a reader does do analyzing several aspects of the text to catch the meaning. She needs to analyze meaning by applying both semantic as well as grammatical analysis As in grammatical analysis, distinctions between surface structures and deep structures also exist in semantic analysis. At the surface level, meaning can be classified into two broad categories: denotative meaning and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning is the meaning of words given in the dictionary and is "integral to the essential functioning of language in a way that other types of meaning are not" (Leech 1981). Connotative meaning is the communicative value of an expression by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely denotative meaning. It reflects the real-world experience one associates with an expression.

It can be rephrased that reading comprehension is the process of understanding the meaning of written materials and covers the conscious strategies that lead to understanding. The process of reading deals with language form, while comprehension, the end product, deals with language content.

In deep structure, meaning can also be divided into two categories: contextual meaning and pragmatic meaning. Unlike the surface meaning of a single word, contextual meaning is realized at the sentence level and the meaning is expressed by a sentence associated with its context. This type of meaning is not decided by the word itself but by the context in which the whole sentence functions. The pragmatic meaning is communicated in the feelings and attitudes of the writer. It is the writer's intended unspoken or unwritten meaning.

In the reading process, the understanding of this type of meaning is implicative because this type of meaning lies outside the organization of language. It cannot be deduced from the linguistic system itself; it is realized at the functional level. Both contextual and pragmatic meanings call for cognitive ability on the part of the reader. Thus, the distinction between surface structure meaning and deep structure meaning is that the former is the literal meaning while the latter is the inferential meaning. Unfortunately, teaching reading comprehension in some high schools focuses only on the surface structure level of comprehension and ignores comprehension at the deep structure level.

Reading comprehension not only includes linguistic recognition and cognitive understanding (semantic comprehension at both surface and deep structure levels), but also tends to be affected by the reader's reactions to the content, which affect the reader's evaluation and appreciation, which become a part of the reader's reading comprehension. If there is no such evaluation and appreciation, comprehension will be incomplete.

With these preliminary considerations in mind, we need to attempt something new and more effective in teaching reading comprehension. The model presented here, adapted from Carrell et al (1988) who introduce 'interactive model' and Sheng (2000) who proposes 'cognitive model.' The two models are almost similar one another since they deal with making use of background knowledge to come to a

better comprehension. The combination of the two models can be applied to students of different levels and adapted to their various needs.

2. The Interactive and Cognitive Model: Combination Activities

This idea is basically inspirited from some experts ideas on teaching reading such as Nuttall (1996) and Aebersold and Field (1997). As the focus of this article, the main aspects of activities associated with the combination of interactive and cognitive models of reading comprehension strategies can be seen from different levels of comprehension, beginning from the lowest level (literal comprehension) to the highest level of comprehension (evaluation and appreciation). The following discussion will be focused on these levels.

B. DISCUSSION

1. Literal comprehension training

In my experience, training students in literal comprehension consists of using two types of tasks: recognition tasks and recall tasks. Recognition tasks require students to identify the main points in the reading selection or in exercises that use the explicit content of the reading selection. Recall tasks, on the other hand, demand that students produce from memory explicit statements from selections. Such tasks are often in the form of questions that teachers pose to students after reading the text. The difficulty level of these two tasks depends on various conditions, such as the students' linguistic abilities or needs and the number of events or incidents to be recalled. Experience shows that a recall task is more difficult than a recognition task when the two tasks deal with the same content.

Literal comprehension activities may include the following activities:

a. *Recognition or recall of details:* identifying or recalling such facts as the names of characters in a narrative genre, the time a story took place, the setting of a story, or an incident described in the story.

b. *Recognition or recall of the topic sentences/main ideas:* locating, identifying, or producing from memory an explicit statement or main idea from a descriptive and an expository texts

c. *Recognition or recall of sequence:* recalling the order of incidents or actions explicitly stated in the material such as recall and sequential texts

d. *Recognition or recall of descriptions:* identifying some similarities and differences in the text which are explicitly described by the author in a comparative text

e. *Recognition or recall of cause and effect relationships:* identifying reasons for certain incidents, events, or characters' actions explicitly stated in the selection containing information of causes and effects.

2. Inferential comprehension training

Students demonstrate their inferential abilities when they use their personal knowledge, intuition, and imagination as a basis for conjectures or hypotheses. Inferential comprehension involves more logical thinking than literal understanding and is elicited by teachers' questions which demand thinking and imagination. Some examples of inferential tasks are:

a. *Inferring supporting details:* guessing about additional facts the author might have included in the selection which would have made it more informative, interesting, or appealing

b. *Inferring the main idea:* providing the main idea, theme, or moral which is not explicitly stated in the selection

c. *Inferring consequence:* predicting what would happen in cause-effect relationships, or hypothesizing about alternative beginnings to a story if the author had not provided one, or predicting the ending of the story before reading it

d. *Inferring cause and effect relationships:* guessing what

caused a certain event and explaining the rationale

e. *Inferring character traits:* hypothesizing about the nature of characters on the basis of explicit clues presented in the selection

f. *Inferring figurative language:* inferring literal meaning from the author's figurative use of language.

3. Evaluation Training

In my mind, students can demonstrate evaluation when they are able to make judgements about the content of a certain genre or reading selection by comparing it with information provided by the teacher or authorities on the subject, or with their own experience, knowledge, or values related to the subject. In other words, evaluation requires students to make judgements about the content of their readings based on accuracy, acceptability, worth, desirability, completeness, suitability, timeliness, quality, truthfulness, and probability of occurrence. The following are types of evaluation tasks:

a. *Objective evaluation:* judging the soundness of statements or events in the reading material based on external criteria, such as supporting evidence, reasons, and logic

b. *Subjective evaluation:* making judgements about the statements or events presented based on internal criteria, such as one's biases, beliefs, or preferences

c. *Judgements of adequacy or validity:* judging whether the author's treatment of a subject is accurate and complete when compared to other sources on that subject

d. *Judgments about appropriateness:* determining whether certain selections or parts of selections are relevant and contribute to resolving an issue or a problem

e. *Judgement of worth, desirability, or acceptability:* judging the suitability of a character's actions in a particular incident based on the reader's personal values

4. Appreciation Training

The training of appreciation can be mostly done to narrative. Appreciation deals with the psychological and aesthetic impact of the selection on the reader. It includes both knowledge of and emotional responses to literary techniques, forms, styles, and structures. Some activities that can be trained include the following:

a. *Personal impression:* reacting to the context, events, and characters

b. *Recognition of rhetorical devices:* identifying the rhetorical devices in the material and explaining their functions

c. *Reactions to the style:* describing and reacting to the writer's use of language and stylistic devices

d. *Evaluation of imagery:* identifying and assessing the effectiveness of the writer's sensory images

The combination of the two models can be realized in the form some terms with identical meaning such as figuring out the semantic mapping, outlining, analyzing the organizational patterns, or analyzing the generic structure. Those terms should be all familiar to English teachers who are responsible to help students to be good readers. This model can be applied to any levels of students. It can also be appropriate for Senior high school students or even university students.

5. The Advantages of the Model

This model is designed for language teachers who are training or planning to train learners to have good reading comprehension strategies. In my experience, the combination of these two models has both theoretical and practical values. The advantages of this model can be as follows:

a. It can be used to help students comprehend the text from different perspectives and to understand the implications of the content.

b. It is applicable at various skill levels and meets different needs. For example, it can be used in teaching literal meaning and concrete facts or

deep structure meaning and literature appreciation.

c. It enables students to analyze and summarize the text as well as to distinguish arguments from supporting details.

d. It enhances students' memorization and speed-reading.

e. Because students use different modes of thinking, it develops their critical thinking and inference skills.

f. Finally, it improves students' organizational skills and self expression.

C. CONCLUSION

I have discussed a model that I have tried to use in developing my students' reading comprehension followed by its advantages. It is hopeful that readers who are English teachers at SMP or SMA may take some basic ideas from this small article. Here, I introduce some possible activities to train the students' reading comprehension skills at all levels. Although some of the strategies or skills seem to be rather simple, I believe that they are necessary for beginners. Some of the strategies or skills seem to overlap, yet they are used for different purposes in comprehension.

REFERENCES

Aebersold, J.A. and Field, M.L. 1997. *From Reader to Reading Teacher.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goodman, Kenneth. 1988. The reading process. In Carrell, P.L., J. Devine, and D. E. Eskey. *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grabe, William. 1988. Reassessing the term 'interactive'. In Carrell, P.L., J. Devine, and D. E.Eskey. *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jacobus, Mary. 1999. *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leech, Geoffrey. 1981. *Semantics.* 2nd edition. London: Penguin Books.

McWhorter, Kathleen T. 1992, *Efficient and Flexible Reading.* New York: Harper Collins Publisher.

Nuttall, C. 1996. *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language.* Oxford: Heinemann.

Sheng, He Ji. 2000. 'A cognitive model for teaching reading comprehension. *English Teaching Forum.* 38.4: 12-17.