

READING BASED-CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES: AN EFFORT TOWARD THE INTEGRATION OF LANGUAGE SKILLS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN INDONESIA

Abdul Hadi

Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim, Riau

Abstract: This paper proposes the implementation of reading-based classroom activities for teaching English as a foreign language in Indonesia. Compared to other language skills, reading is viewed to provide a relatively stable foundation for Indonesian students to develop their communicative competence in English. It is argued that reading-focused activities stimulate confidence for Indonesian learners to get involved in listening, speaking, and writing related-activities in ways that are similar to normal daily life communication. The reasons for the proposed implementation of reading-based classroom activities in TEFLIN and the role of reading and its relation with other language skills are presented.

Key words: reading-based classroom activities, communicative competence, TEFLIN.

Language is an integral part of human life. Our life is full of language activities, which enable us to interact and communicate with one another. We start our day by waking up our children, reading newspaper, listening to the radio or writing some notes in our agenda, and continue the rest of the day hardly ever being able to stay apart from language activities. Without language, our life is like a mute baby, since it is language that becomes the major vehicle to convey the translation of what we do, what we think and what we feel. We need to say “Good Morning”, for example, to let other people know that we arrive, that we want to

join them, or that we are friendly. We need language to interact and to convey the translation of our activities, thoughts and feelings.

The notion that language is an inseparable part of interaction and communication leads us to recognize how language activities occur in our daily interaction and communication. First, they are not sequenced. We cannot decide to listen first, then speak, read and finally write. Any language activity may begin and end an interaction or communication. Then, two or more language activities may occur to meet the need of the interaction or communication. These occurrences of language activities—which may be simultaneous—derive from people's different needs, tendency and capacity in interaction and communication. When asked about the best way to understand a lecture, three students give different answers. The first student says, "I need to listen to my lecturer's explanation before reading this chapter". The second says, "I need to read this chapter before listening to my lecturer's explanation and write the summary; and the last says, "I need to read this chapter, write the main points, listen to my lecturer's explanation and then ask questions or comment on what the lecturer has explained. In real life situation there is no specific sequence of language activities and they are rarely isolated.

Now let us see how our activities, thoughts and feelings are translated into language activities. Speaking to a man carrying a heavy burden in a busy market, one might say, "You work hard". Or alone in his room thinking of the answer to a Math problem, a student might suddenly say, "I've got it. It's not really difficult". Or feeling sad after the death of her beloved mother, a girl might write several sentences in her diary or listen to a song of her mother's favorite or read a poetry written by the mother to express her feeling. The illustrations given above help us understand that in normal daily life settings, spontaneous and natural language activities occur as ways of communicating the translations of our activities, thoughts, and feelings.

Thus far, we have been exposed to the idea that in real life situation language activities are not sequenced and rarely isolated. They are also spontaneous and natural. Observing these phenomena, experts and researchers in English language teaching methodology have suggested that teachers of English adjust their teaching in the classrooms so that students' language learning can take place in a way similar to how language activities are conducted in the real world. McDonough and Shaw (1993) argue that:

If we look around us in our daily lives we can see that we rarely use language in isolation but in conjunction, ... even though the classrooms are clearly not the same as 'real life', it could be argued that part of its function is to replicate it. If one of the jobs of the teacher is to make the students 'communicatively competent' in the L2, this will involve more than being able to perform in each of the four skills separately. By giving learners tasks which expose them to these skills in conjunction, it is possible that they will gain a deeper understanding of how communication works in the foreign language as well as becoming more motivated when they see the value of performing meaningful tasks and activities in the classroom (pp.201-202).

In addition, Haverson (1991) suggests that classroom language learning is viewed as a continuation of students' language experiences which they bring into the classroom. There should not be a distinctive separation between how language mastery develops in their daily life and how it is learnt in the classroom. Therefore, language activities in the classroom (listening, reading, speaking, writing) are ideally to be interrelated one another as they are practiced in daily life settings. In learning a language, deficiency or growth in any one of the four language skills may cause deficiency or growth in another (Haverson, 1991).

WHY READING-BASED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES?

Ideally we can expect to begin an English class with activities focusing on any one of the four language skills. This will vary the focus of the activities and lessen boredom on the part of the students as well as adopting how language is used in the real world. However, in the context of Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Indonesia (TEFLIN), this expectation seems to be rather far from its fulfillment. It seems that beginning an English language class with activities focusing on reading skill and then relate it to activities promoting the mastery of one, two or possibly three of the other language skills is one most likely thing to do toward the integration of language skills in teaching English as a foreign language in Indonesia.

There are three reasons why the application of Reading-Based Classroom Activities is proposed for teaching EFL in Indonesia. First, in Indonesia English is taught as a foreign language. Prator (1991) states that the term TEFL (Teaching/Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) is "used in educational situations where instruction in other subjects is not normally given in English"(p.21).

In other words, learners of English in Indonesia are only exposed to English when they study this subject, outside the English class they almost never get exposed to English. Moreover, the teaching of English, in many instances, is presented in a mixture of Bahasa Indonesia and English, or totally in Bahasa Indonesia. In general, this minimum exposure to English, then, contributes to students' unsatisfactory performance in the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. The students' poor performance in listening and speaking is related to the nature of these two language skills. Rivers (in Morley 1991) indicates that listening is impossible without speaking, and speaking is meaningless when there is no listening. Students' listening ability is influenced in a great deal by exposure to spoken English, which—in the context of TEFLIN—is very limited. In addition, it is a skill which deals with sound—not prints—which cannot be recaptured once it has passed, except it is recorded or repeated (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). Almost similar to listening ability, speaking ability is also influenced in a great deal by exposure to spoken English. If in listening, the purpose is to understand the spoken English, in speaking the purpose can be to imitate the teacher's pronunciation, stress or intonation, and to see how teachers develop and produce the spoken language. Thus, exposure to spoken English inside the class as well as in the every day life plays a very influential role in developing students' proficiency in listening and speaking.

As described above, insufficient exposure to English contributes to students' poor performance in the four language skills. Reading is one of them. However, problems in improving students' reading ability seem to be a bit easier—since it has a very different nature from listening and speaking. As reading process deals with print, the information contained in the text can be recaptured or reread. Students, then, have enough time to solve problems they encounter in reading. Moreover, Indonesian students are exposed to more written English than to spoken English. It seems to us that this more exposure to written English is closely related to the fact that “reading is often the chief goal of learners in countries where English is taught as a foreign language “ (Dubin & Bycina, 1991, p.195). As a result, learning facilities that promote the mastery of written skills are more available than those that promote the mastery of spoken skills. Unfortunately this availability of written English materials does not imply concomitant increase in Indonesian students' reading ability.

Writing, although much similar in nature to reading, is a complicated language skill for most students to develop. It requires not only one's linguistic competence but also his broad knowledge of the world and creative thinking.

This is in accordance with Marriane Celce-Murcia's idea in *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. She indicates that even many native speakers of English face great difficulties to master this skill. Writing is also dependent on the level of mastery in listening, speaking and particularly reading as sources of ideas, and models to develop the writing skill.

After some elaboration, we can see that the teaching of the four language English skill in Indonesia is faced with the fact that English is taught as a foreign language, which then means reading becomes the primary goal of learning English (Dubin & Bycina, 1991). We also observe that, of the four language skills, students can feel more confident to learn English when they are given opportunity to get involved in reading-focused activities before doing other classroom activities which focus on listening, speaking, and writing. This is the second reason for the possibility to implement reading-based classroom activities in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Indonesia.

The advice "read a lot, you will gain more knowledge" has an everlasting effect. It is always useful to read. Moreover, it is easy to do and personal as reading—in daily life—hardly ever involves other people. Moreover, reading may evoke one's background knowledge and previous experience that are related to the reading material he/she is reading (McDonough and Shaw, 1993). These natures of reading help facilitate the build-up of ideas in wide range of topics, strengthen vocabulary and grammar mastery, provide models to promote the mastery of productive language skills, especially writing (Langan, 1986). In other words, students may feel more prepared to get involved in classroom activities focusing on any other language skills when the activities are based on reading focused-activities. Reading focused-activities help students to be better equipped both in term of linguistic competence and in term of ideas developed before beginning listening, speaking and writing activities. This will gradually improve students' performance in the four language skills.

The last reason for the application of reading-based classroom activities is a matter of literacy. Compared to students countries such as China, India, and most countries in the Middle East, students in Indonesia are actually more fortunate due to the fact that the English language they learn use exactly the same alphabet as their native language (Bahasa Indonesia) does; the Roman Script. Logically it is easier to read in a foreign language when its alphabet is the same as that of one's native language. Even, this similarity of alphabet is of significant aid for students learning a foreign language to lessen burden in gaining meaning while reading a foreign language text (Jones in Haverson, 1991). The ease in

reading will, in turn, facilitate learning or development of the other three language skills. However, many students in Indonesia seem unable to take advantage from this similarity. Their English reading ability is still unsatisfactory since their mastery of other areas which are also influential in developing reading ability—vocabulary, grammar and comprehension of schema/script building—cannot give enough support to unlock meaning from the printed words. Nevertheless, as acquisition of basic literacy, which is the threshold of reading comprehension, is a first step to be self-sufficient and independent in learning a foreign language (Mayer in Haverson, 1991), similarity of alphabet between Indonesian and English is certainly effectual to facilitate English learning for most Indonesian students.

READING AND OTHER LANGUAGE SKILLS

The use of reading materials such as books, magazines, newspapers, journals, advertisements, etc, has long been acknowledged in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language. Therefore, a very obvious phenomenon is that almost no English language class can run successfully without the use of such reading materials, which then means reading is always a prerequisite to achieve the goal of any English language teaching/learning. For most Indonesian students—who have limited exposure to oral English communication—reading becomes the first stepping stone to develop proficiency in the language. “Reading materials devised based on the information gap principle, for example, is an activity in reading class which clearly links reading with other forms of communication, e.g. speaking/discussion or listening/writing, and can thus provide a reading-driven integration of the language skills” (McDonough and Shaw, 1993 p.114). Thus, competence in other language skills is, to a certain extent, dependent on competence in reading. If it is the case, then, the teaching of reading in the context of TEFL--particularly TEFLIN-- has to be based on careful consideration of all aspects related to teaching it. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to have sufficient exposure to some basic principle of teaching reading.

READING AS A LANGUAGE SKILL

Reading, in many instances, is the most important language skill (Poulsten and Bruder, 1976). Many people around the world—especially those from the developing countries—struggle very hard to read English written materials to

meet the demand of their work or study. In the beginning, this is simply done for a single purpose mentioned above. However, motivation to have the ability to speak, listen or write in English may grow quite significantly along with the efforts to face the challenge to read English written materials at work or study. In this context, reading may appear to be a language skill of high priority to develop in teaching English as a foreign language. This is in line with Dubin and Bycina's statement. They notice that "reading is often the chief goal of learners in countries where English is taught as a foreign language" (1991, p.195). Therefore, more attention needs to be given to the teaching and learning of reading.

Among the aspects that should be taken into account in developing students' reading skills are purpose of reading, its nature and approaches in teaching it. Ignorance to one or more of these aspects may result in slow progress or even failure in teaching reading. And since reading ability contributes to some extent to the development in other language skills, this may also result in slow progress or failure in TEFL as a whole. Thus, proportional attention has to be given to these aspects in any efforts carried out on purpose of developing students' reading ability (e.g. in designing syllabus/curriculum, lesson plan, teaching materials, etc). The following is brief explanation on how each of these aspects influences the development of students' reading ability.

People read for different purposes. Some read for general information, some read for specific information, some other read for pleasure or interest (William in McDonough and Shaw, 1993). In teaching reading, especially when the language is foreign to the students, however, teachers need to assist students to set their reading purposes so as to facilitate comprehension and responses from them. Failure to do this may lower students' motivation or discourage them to make attempts for comprehension as well as to react to what is written in the text. This usually becomes worse when the language used (vocabulary, phrases, grammar) is quite complicated for the students. Guiding students to realize for what purpose they are reading a text is a first step to successful teaching.

The next aspect which should be taken into consideration in developing students' reading ability is concerned with the natures of reading. First, since reading is usually labeled as a receptive skill, a comprehensive understanding of this label should be given to both teachers and students. Partial understanding of reading as a receptive skill has misled teachers and students to view reading as a passive skill. It is true that learners receive information and enjoyment from the reading materials but this fact is not to justify the notion that they are just like

“empty vessels who brought nothing to the text” (McDonough and Shaw, 1993, p.104). It is important to note that the process of receiving information or enjoyment itself can occur successfully after close interaction between the reader and the text. Successful reading like this can then encourage readers to respond to what is written in the text. It is a proof that reading is actually an active process. The second nature of reading is that it is seen as the most private activity among the four language skills. And this results in differences among learners in their reading approaches and needs. Privacy in reading is basically very valuable to promote learners’ better skill in reading when it is accommodated in such a way so as to minimize problems in getting feedback on this private process. Proportional attention to these natures of reading in syllabus or curriculum design and lesson plan making is the next step to maximum success in teaching reading.

The last aspect which is of important consideration deals with approaches in teaching reading. It is important to remember that the activity that we call reading results from interactive variables that operate simultaneously rather than sequentially (Hawkins, 1991). Therefore, any approaches in teaching reading should cover various facets that play important role in the reading process. Learners’ age, experience and background knowledge on the reading materials, familiarity to English alphabets, educational and cultural background, privacy and interest in reading are of most common considerations in determining approaches to the teaching of reading (Hawkins, Haverson, Dubin and Bycina, 1991).

To accommodate the various facets involved in the reading process, in general, writers interested in the development of learners’ reading ability seem to agree that there are three models of reading process (Poulsten and Bruder, 1976; Hawkins, Haverson, Dubin and Bycina, 1991), that —later— will affect which approach to use in teaching reading. The first is Bottom-Up Reading. The principal idea of this model is that reading can only be taught after learners have well-established phonemic habits (Bloomfield in Dubin and Bycina, 1991). This is in line with the Basal Reader Approach in which “mastery of sound/symbol correspondence is at the heart of the approach in that they are considered the fundamentals that are necessary for reading instruction” (Hawkins, 1991, p.179). Bottom-up reading is especially suitable for EFL students who are more in need of strong phonics than native speakers of English. However, relying too much on this process is not adequate if EFL students are to succeed in their reading. It should be supplemented with other meaning-based activities. The second is

Top-Down Reading. It is the opposite of previous model of reading process as it emphasizes more on comprehension and only partly on the phonic, syntactic and semantic systems of the language (Dubin and Bycina, 1991). According to this model, students are demanded to be active (guessing/predicting, recalling previous experience or information, reading for main ideas etc) and do not only spend their time struggling to decode word after word. This model may be quite difficult for, especially, beginning EFL readers who are still trying hard to master sound-symbol correspondences of English. The last is interactive model. This model was proposed because the two models above cannot satisfy all the needs of EFL learners to do successful reading. It combines bottom-up and top-down readings. It is viewed that successful reading activities require both familiarity to the reading text or ability to predict and mastery of language elements necessary to support comprehension. Top-down and bottom-up processes become complementary each other in the interactive models.

CONCLUSION

As may be seen from the above discussion, integration of language skills in teaching a foreign language is actually the natural need of learners. If we, teachers, intend to enhance learners' performance in English, we need to adjust our teaching with learners' normal interaction with language. However, since the role of English differs from place to place, from country to country, a minimum modification of this adjustment has to be done on purpose to facilitate better mastery of the English language.

In Indonesia, the teaching of English as a foreign language has been implemented for years, but with relatively unsatisfactory result. Reading-based classroom activities present an alternative to gradually improve results of English Language Teaching in the country.

Observing the fact that reading--compared to other language skills--seems to have received more attention in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Indonesia (TEFLIN), it is worth to make use of the circumstance as an entry point for language skills integration in the teaching of English in the country. To successfully implement this classroom activity, teachers are expected to be familiar with available resources regarding the teaching of reading English written materials for various levels of learners so that it can become a sound base for other language skills activities. A further discussion on this topic is certainly still

needed to elaborate the steps and techniques for the implementation of this reading-based activity in TEFLIN.

REFERENCES

- Celce-Murcia, M. (Ed.) 1991. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. New York: Newbury House.
- Dubin, F., & Bycina, D. 1991. Academic Reading and the ESL/EFL Teacher.. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.) *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. (pp. 195-215). New York: Newbury House.
- Haverson, W. W. 1991. Adult Literacy Training. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.) *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. (pp. 185-194). New York: Newbury House.
- Hawkins, B. 1991. Teaching Children to Read in a Second Language. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.) *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. (pp. 169-183). New York: Newbury House.
- Langan, J. 1986. *College Writing Skills, with Readings*. Singapore: McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- McDonough, J., & Shaw, C. 1993. *Materials and Methods in ELT*. Oxford UK: Blackwell.
- Morley, J. 1991. Listening Comprehension in Second/Foreign Language Instruction. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.) *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. (pp. 81-106). New York: Newbury House.
- Poulsten, B. C., & Bruder, N. M. *Teaching English as a Second Language: Techniques and Procedures*. Prator C. H. (1991). Cornerstones of Method and Names for the Profession. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.) *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. (pp. 11-22). New York: Newbury House.