



Qualitative Research into Reading in English as a Foreign Language in Indonesia – Quo Vadis?

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Abstract: *Reading is a multidimensional, intellectual activity, which requires specific skills and strategies. Indonesian researchers have conducted research addressing various issues in reading in the domain of English as a Foreign Language/EFL. This article reviews the current development of theories and models of EFL reading and qualitative research into EFL reading in Indonesia. Through discussion of theoretical and practical perspectives, it appears that EFL reading researchers and teachers in Indonesia are interested in promoting and conducting studies not only on the effectiveness of intensive reading, but also of extensive reading in their academic institutions. In this way, their students will have sufficient opportunities to gain competence in both types of reading, and will develop the capability of using their knowledge of English to capitalise on the advancement of science and technology in the global world.*

Keywords: *EFL reading, extensive reading, intensive reading, models of reading*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a multidimensional, intellectual activity which requires specific skills and strategies. Many researchers in reading are, therefore, keen to clarify what reading actually is. Defining reading is anything but easy, although such a definition is of paramount importance for the sake of the profundity of the discussions in this article. A basic definition of reading might be an ability to acquire meaning from printed texts and interpret them properly. In *The Literacy Dictionary* (Harris & Hodges, 2005, p. 207), reading is defined as “intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader”. Urquhart and Weir (1998, p. 22) state that “reading is receiving and interpreting the information encoded in language form via the medium of print”. These definitions seem too myopic and fail to cover the complexity of reading which ranges from various processes involved in reading (e.g., word recognition, syntactic parsing, semantic proposition, background knowledge activation, and discourse organisation) to different purposes for reading (e.g., reading for general comprehension, reading for specific information, and reading for learning). Grabe (2009) states that defining reading necessitates addressing a complex combination of processes, including a rapid and efficient reading process, a comprehending process, an interactive process (between reader, text, and writer), a strategic process, a purposeful process, an evaluative process, a learning process, and a linguistic process.

With regard to various teaching methods and research on reading, Grabe and Stoller (2019) define reading skills as linguistics processing abilities that are

relatively automatic in their use and their combinations. These skills include word recognition and syntactic processing. Then, reading strategies are described as a set of abilities under conscious control of the reader. Nevertheless, fluent readers can automatically employ strategies such as skipping unknown words while reading, and rereading to establish text meaning.

In a fundamental division, Williams (1998) argues that there are two kinds of reading; initial reading and reading comprehension. Initial reading denotes efforts by readers at the beginner's level – those who are still learning how to read alphabets, letters, words, and phrases. Conversely, reading comprehension represents activities aimed at understanding a particular text, from the literal meaning of sentences to interpretative meaning of the entire text. Discussing the second type of reading, Grabe and Stoller (2019) state that reading comprehension is a set of multifaceted capabilities which involve rapid, efficient, interactive, strategic, flexible, evaluating, purposeful, comprehending, leaning, and linguistic processes. All of these are interconnected to assist readers to achieve a full understanding of a specific text.

In Indonesia, where English functions as a foreign language (EFL), the teaching of reading includes teaching reading comprehension. In this case, teaching is aimed at developing students' skills to understand the meaning of written texts in EFL contexts. One of the objectives of *English language teaching in the Indonesian education system is actually to provide learners with advanced reading skills that enable them to read and comprehend texts in English* (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006; Masduqi & Prihananto, 2021; Richards & Renandya, 2002).

This paper addresses current issues within qualitative research into EFL reading in Indonesia. To begin with, the writers discuss general perspectives and current developments among theories and models of EFL reading. Then, the writers discuss a broad spectrum of issues about English language teaching in Indonesia. From this point on, it is possible for the writers to highlight and discuss qualitative research relating to EFL reading in Indonesia. Based on the qualitative studies, the writers offer suggestions for future researchers of EFL reading in Indonesia to conduct further studies for the improvement of reading instruction in Indonesia.

THEORIES OF EFL READING

In considering the vast coverage of reading, Alderson (2010) suggests that any reading theories should start from the nature of reading itself; the process of reading and the product of reading. The reading process deals mainly with what takes place when people are reading a text, such as decoding symbols or terms, negotiating meaning, thinking about the challenges or ease when reading, and, eventually, deciding whether or not the text is worth reading. On the other hand, the product of reading relates to how readers come to understand a text they are reading. This refers not only to how people reach the fact of understanding, but also to what kind of understanding they reach after reading. Both process and product of reading are equally important and are inextricably related to what purpose a reader pursues in reading a particular text.

Dealing with reading purposes, Harmer (2001) suggests that there are two kinds of reading: intensive reading and extensive reading. Intensive reading is a kind of attentive reading that is likely to be serious, focused, and committed to a certain academic achievement. In contrast, extensive reading is more relaxed – a kind of long reading which is usually carried out for pleasure or entertainment. In this kind of reading, students usually read long stories, novelettes, or novels in the library, resource centre, and other learning facilities beyond their classrooms. In ideal circumstances of teaching EFL reading, learners should be well provided-for with both intensive and extensive readings.

Historically, the teaching of EFL reading has attracted linguists and educators since the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) was proposed as the first method of language teaching. Based on GTM, reading materials in a foreign language were the key components in language teaching. Therefore, memorising impractical grammar rules and vocabulary, and translating words of a particular text in the target language with meanings in the learners' first language, were prioritized in daily teaching (Dubin & Bycina, 1991; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Furthermore, monotonous translation and grammar drills were employed to work out and reinforce the knowledge without much consideration of content, whereas how learners undergo the process of understanding longer texts and carry out communicative activities for oral production was not a main concern (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). No wonder most educators abandoned the non-interactive grammar translation method.

Following the demise of GTM, new methods appeared, each with a similar claim that it was better or more effective in producing good language users than its predecessor. These methods include the Direct Method (in the mid- to late-nineteenth century), Audio Lingual Method, and Situational Language Teaching (in the 1950s and 1960s), Communicative Approach, Silent Way, Natural Approach, and Total Physical Response (in the 1970s and 1980s). In the 1990s Content-Based Instruction and Task-Based Language Teaching were proposed as novel approaches. Nevertheless, it should be noted that most of the language methods emphasised the need to speak proficiency over reading comprehension. The teaching of reading was usually given substantial attention after learners showed improved speaking skills. Since the end of the twentieth century, the majority of language educators have ceased to judge the teaching methods as the important aspect in justifying the success or failure of language teaching. The so-called post-method era (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) arose when educators found that no single teaching method can work best in all pedagogical contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

By the end of the twentieth century some linguists came up with the idea of supporting students to arrive at optimal reading comprehension of a particular text. This issue became more crucial as language teaching experts became increasingly concerned with the teaching trend in ESL/EFL reading which aimed at boosting students' proper reading comprehension of academic textbooks and similar materials in the target language. They argue that reading comprehension of written academic texts is a prerequisite tool for academic achievement (Lynch & Hudson, 1991). Furthermore, written academic texts help to achieve a number of educational goals such as improving the language acquisition process, providing good models

for writing, and offering chances to present new topics, encourage discussions, and learn the language (Richards & Renandya, 2002). These demands led to the creation of models of reading which include the bottom-up model, the top-down model, and the interactive model.

MODELS OF EFL READING

In the realm of EFL reading, the most popular models of reading among numerous researchers are the bottom-up model, the top-down model, and the interactive model. In the first model, readers proceed with little assistance from their schemata to follow an automatic pattern in which they produce a bit-by-bit mental translation of the information in the text. This includes the relationship between phonemes and graphemes (Dubin & Bycina, 1991), word recognition abilities, and syntactic parsing (Grabe & Stoller, 2019).

Not long after the decline of the bottom-up model in EFL reading, the top-down model emerges. This second model sees reading as a process of reconstructing meaning, and stresses comprehension of more meaningful elements beyond words, phrases, and sentences (Dubin & Bycina, 1991). In this model, reading is carried out by active readers who set their own goals and expectations. They might engage in reading activities, such as guessing vocabulary meaning from the context, finding useful information in the text, predicting the text using background knowledge, and making inferences (Grabe & Stoller, 2019).

The last model, the interactive, combines the two previous models of reading. Principally, it involves learners in interactional activities to bring together all meaning. Proponents of this interactive model acknowledge the importance of background knowledge and prediction, while reinforcing the role of simultaneously processing vocabulary in the text (Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1988; Dubin & Bycina, 1991; Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Elaborating on the combination, Harmer (2001) asserts that it is the individual details that occasionally help readers to understand the whole text, and sometimes it is the general idea that assists readers to process details in the text. Thus, both the reader and the text play equally important roles in facilitating the process of reading and understanding (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988).

The theories underlying the models of reading outlined above basically show how readers go through activities to achieve reading comprehension. Accordingly, the theories also play a significant role in understanding how the teaching of reading should be put into practice in the EFL context. In Indonesia, the development of theories and models of EFL reading have been a fundamental, influential issue, since reading is a primary focus in English language teaching at all education levels in the nation.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN EFL READING

Qualitative research, as defined by Neuman (2003), is the kind of research that uses *soft data* – impressions, words, sentences, photos, symbols etc., as opposed to numbers – that are interpreted to construct meanings in specific settings. This definition of qualitative research is based on the type of data gathered and interpreted. A much broader definition of qualitative research is given by Ary et al.

(2018), who state that qualitative research is a scientific inquiry that aims to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of the participants. This kind of research uses data generated in natural settings, usually with face-to-face interactions, and aims at primarily generating, as opposed to testing, a theory. It can be inferred that in qualitative research a researcher aims to get participants' opinions, perceptions and feelings.

In this article, some qualitative studies relating to EFL reading in Indonesia are chosen and discussed for a number of reasons in accordance with general principles of qualitative research (Ary et al., 2018; Neuman, 2003). First, the researchers do not utilise experimentation or stringent measurement; they mostly count on their participants' verbal accounts during interviews and observations. Secondly, all data collected in these studies are subject to different interpretations, since the chosen qualitative studies involve the researchers' subjectivity in interpreting the data. Thirdly, all the studies view the participants as dynamic subjects who are free to give opinions and share experiences during interviews and observations. In this way, most verbal accounts by the participants are taken into account and are interpreted within the particular context. Lastly, the results of the chosen studies might not be generalisable, but apply only to the specific contexts or places of the EFL reading studies in which research participants are involved.

The first area of research in reading focuses on factors influencing EFL reading skills from both students' and teachers' perspectives. Imran (2005), who investigates this area from the students' point of view, asserts that students' reading behaviour is influenced by their cultural background and individual differences. These factors impact on students' reading performance. Using classroom observations and interviews, Imran discovered that improving students' knowledge of subject areas, language skills, motivation and confidence is vital to learners' reading performance. Accordingly, EFL learners require assistance to increase their ability and willingness to learn in order to be more confident and independent readers. In this case, the pre-reading stage, commonly used by English teachers to relate reading text to their students' background knowledge, is important for better reading comprehension. Fahmi (2003) states that it is crucial to furnish EFL learners with reading materials that are compatible with their prior knowledge or schemata. Based on the findings of his action research, he suggests activities that are useful in activating students' schemata prior to the whilst-reading stage. These activities include eliciting students' ideas before giving the text, assisting them in understanding difficult words, asking them to predict what happens at the next reading stage, and telling them how to write a summary of a reading text. The importance of prior knowledge to students' reading success is also discussed in Zuhra's (2015) study. Based on her semi-structured interview with high-school students, she suggests that students' low prior knowledge of different types of reading comprehension questions cause them difficulty in answering comprehension questions. Some EFL reading researchers suggest that, in addition to cultural background, individual differences, and prior knowledge, students' vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies and anxiety levels while reading play

crucial roles in enhancing students' success in reading (Jayanti, 2016; Floris & Divina, 2009; Sutarsyah, 2008). In contrast to those studies, Nurkamto et al. (2021) explore the problems of reading from a teacher's point of view. They interviewed 31 senior Islamic secondary school English teachers from six different provinces in Indonesia. Their study suggests that teachers have issues in utilising different strategies to teach vocabulary and reading, making use of teaching materials, and improving students' reading motivation and autonomy. Research in this area recommends that teachers be creative in making innovations, and employ various strategies to teach reading more meaningfully and overcome negative factors.

The second area of research in reading in the Indonesian EFL context investigates various strategies that can be implemented in the classroom to enhance students' reading skills. One of the strategies, to integrate summarising skills in EFL reading, has been investigated in studies including Cahyono (1996), in which 43 students in Malang, East Java, were guided in writing a summary of a text based on the Content-Based Summarising Technique (CBST). Using content analysis to match propositions in the students' summaries with information in the text, Cahyono reveals that CBST is applicable in reading instruction, as the students perform well in summarising the reading text. The positive result is shared by another study conducted in Palu, Central Sulawesi, by Aratusa (2017), in which 20 students using CBST performed better than the group of 19 students who were not. Another recommended strategy is the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) technique. Some studies have confirmed the effectiveness of CIRC technique at primary and secondary education levels (Niliawati et al., 2018; Saputri et al., 2016; Yudasmini & Marhaeni, 2015). Based on those studies, CIRC technique, which relies on peer collaboration, is empirically proven to enhance students' problem-solving skills in reading. In a different way, Hamra and Syatriana (2010) believe that the Interactive Model of Teaching Reading Comprehension (IMTRC) is effective in improving students' reading comprehension by focusing on five principles, namely previous knowledge, reading skills, reading knowledge, reading participation, and reading environments.

Dealing with efforts to improve students' reading skills, Astika (1992) conducted classroom action research which applied an integrated model for teaching reading. Her reading lesson comprised five stages: pre-reading activity, vocabulary study, cohesive devices, reading selection, and comprehension questions. After completing two cycles of the research, she found that the five stages could enhance learners' reading skills as long as the reading materials using the five stages were adjusted to students' levels, including those who are skilful and unskilled in reading. In Sugiharto's classroom action research (2005), 40 students who were intensively exposed to integrated reading and writing activities performed better in reading and, eventually, in writing. Most of them performed well in terms of understanding content, thought organization, vocabulary, and

mechanics. This is in line with Thornburry's (2017) and Darn's perspective (2006), that an integrated lesson can encourage students to notice language when their reading is followed by activities involving other English skills. Accordingly, teachers can vary their teaching approaches and classroom activities, familiarise students with the broader cultural context, increase students' motivation, and improve their general and specific language competence. Furthermore, the variety of teaching stages and integration of receptive skills (e.g., reading and listening) and productive skills (e.g., writing and speaking) are important for students to achieve lesson aims and eventually increase their opportunities to develop their English skills (Masduqi, 2016).

In relation to English textbooks for tertiary students, Ridwan, Moorees and Suharna (1996) conducted descriptive qualitative research which analysed reading textbooks used at ten state and private universities in Indonesia. They argue that the structures of most expository texts in academic textbooks at university level are complicated and lack explanations of technical vocabulary. The descriptive study reports that these educational books do not contain the clear textual structures needed to help students to comprehend the reading texts better. It can be said that university students' lack of interest in EFL reading results in their ineffectiveness in carrying out most reading tasks, and therefore teachers need to improve their students' reading skills and motivation. Studies relating to students' interest in reading were conducted by Firmanto (2005) and Kweldju (1996). In his survey on students' expectations of reading class, Firmanto states that the class was considered boring and stressful due to several interrelated factors, including exceedingly long reading text/s with unfamiliar vocabulary, a lack of pre-reading activities to activate students' background knowledge, and easily predictable teaching stages by the teachers. The result accords with findings from earlier action research by Kweldju which involved sophomores at the English department in Malang. Kweldju found that students are not willing to read their reading textbooks, even though they actually realise the textbooks are useful. This is due to the students' inadequate prior knowledge, inability to comprehend the reading texts, and complex structure of the textbooks.

In general, qualitative researchers into EFL reading in Indonesia have managed to address various issues ranging from factors influencing students' reading skills to the integration of English skills in a reading lesson. It can be said that the above qualitative studies represent current developments of theories and models of EFL reading in the world. Yet, it is noteworthy that most EFL reading researchers in Indonesia have primarily focused on investigating intensive reading more than extensive reading.

The focus of research on intensive reading is sensible, since teaching of EFL reading at all education levels in Indonesia puts greater emphasis on intensive reading. The emphasis has been put into practice to accomplish the final objective

of academic reading – that is, reading for understanding or mastering scientific knowledge within students’ academic discipline (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006; Masduqi, 2014). In contrast, extensive reading, well researched in western countries and proven useful in improving students’ general knowledge and competence in the target language, has not yet received sufficient attention (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009; Renandya, Hidayati & Ivone, 2021). Recently there has been an increasing amount of research exploring the implementation and benefits of extensive reading in primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education (Anshorah et al., 2019; Delfi & Yamat, 2017; Edy, 2014; Yulia, 2018). The level of commitment of language teachers to implement extensive reading in the long run, however, remains questionable (Renandya et al., 2021).

Based on the discussion of previous qualitative studies above, the authors advise that future researchers into EFL reading in Indonesia conduct further studies on the effectiveness of extensive reading in educational institutions in the country. The research topics might deal with factors supporting the learning process of extensive reading, self-directed learning, and effective ways of teaching extensive reading. Meanwhile, English teachers in Indonesia should create a conducive atmosphere for effective, learner-centred teaching of EFL reading, as suggested by the latest English subject curriculum. In this way, the learners will have ample opportunity to remain active in both intensive and extensive reading, and eventually become independent, self-regulated learners.

CONCLUSION

This article reviews current issues of qualitative research in EFL reading in Indonesia, in accordance with the current development of theories and models of EFL reading around the world, and the latest context of English language teaching in Indonesia. It is advisable for Indonesian researchers and teachers to create more supportive and self-directed EFL reading classes to enable students to use reading skills and strategies effectively. In so doing, EFL educators should encourage learners to carry out extensive reading to complement the intensive reading within their classes. It is hoped that through self-regulated learning and student-centred teaching in both types of EFL reading, the Indonesian education system will be able to produce competent English users who can use their English knowledge to capitalise on scientific and technological advancement throughout the globe.

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