Optimizing EFL Learners' Sensitizing Reading Skill: Development of Local Content-Based Textbook

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Abstract

The development of local wisdom based sensitizing reading material is aimed at penetrating one of the imperishable gaps between authentic and non-authentic reading materials dispute in an EFL teaching context. Promoting EFL learners' needs for the first semester students of English department at university level, who rarely or even never have a direct contact with native speakers, with meaningful and contextual reading textbook in an EFL setting is worth contributing. This study utilizes research and development paradigm within four stages, namely planning, development, try-out, and textbook revision. The textbook development resulted fifteen chapters containing fifteen local reading passages from various famous local tourism objects, famous public figures, cultures, traditional cuisines, and music. Each chapter encompasses eight exercises generated from the reading text itself with approximately from 400 to 600 words. Those exercises cover picture reading preview and identification, lexical sets, collocation and formation, literal, interpretive, and critical comprehension, and networking activity through interview and writing activity beyond the text. The average result of textbook validation from reading experts, English practitioners, and learners revealed the average score was 3.76 within the interval 1 to 4 and it was sorted out into 'good' category. Further, revisions toward grammatical error, diction, instruction clarity and picture lay out were also addressed and refined. As the textbook effectiveness toward the improvement of learners' reading comprehension is not measured yet, so an experimental study is welcome for further research to address the issue of textbook effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Reading as one of the influential factors in EFL teaching and learning affords considerable contribution toward EFL learners' language development on contextual vocabulary, grammatical pattern, and cultural expose (Nunan, 1999; Hedge, 2003; Alyousef, 2005). Further, numerous researchers assert that learners' critical thinking skills are boosted from reading activity as well (Farley & Elmore, 1992; Johnson, Archibald, & Tenenbaum, 2010). Among the above advantageous sides of reading, an imperishable debate between authentic reading material and non authentic reading material befall a warm issue in the last three decades. The foremost points of the concern lay on the authentic exposure acquired from the authentic reading texts versus meaningful local content English that the learners' needs in the reading materials where they never have a direct contact with the native language outside of the classroom.

In addressing the above issue, alert awareness should be taken into account toward the merits and demerit of both facets. Numerous researchers share significant merits of authentic material such as richer real discourse, accent and style, native culture and global world information for the learners (Kilickaya, 2004; Spelleri, 2002; Martinez, 2002; Berado, 2006). Meanwhile, the arguments who disagree with authentic material proposed several issue on text readability, cultural appropriateness, and comprehensible input dilemma (Nematollahi & Maghsoudi, 2015; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Kim 2000).

One of the shortcomings of the use authentic reading text lays on the difficulty level issues for EFL learners. The readability of the text hinders learners' comprehension of the text especially for the novice learners who dealt with authentic reading passages. Consequently, learners are not able to acquire meaningful exposures from reading the authentic text. This phenomenon is often overlooked by researchers or EFL textbooks writers to

fulfill learners' needs in EFL reading context with suitable and meaningful reading texts. Moreover, in the ASEAN Economic Community era, where every nation is hoped to promote local wisdom context into global world, EFL teaching has to deem at this concepts as well. As result, the promotion of "Glocalization" (promoting local context into worldwide) is binding in all aspects as well as in EFL teaching itself. In this case, the needs of EFL reading text for basic reading suitable with Indonesian cultural contexts should be carefully developed by adopting transferable language from authentic context, which has closest meaning into the local targeted contexts.

The concept of sensitizing reading is initiated by Grellet (1990). Further, he introduces the concepts of sensitizing exercises in reading text for ESL context. The development of the reading textbook in this study is elaborated following his notions with several adaptations especially in term of reading texts, exercise, assessment and comprehension for EFL learners' contexts. So far, it is no previous study on this in development of textbook in Indonesia especially in English department at university level in EFL contexts.

In addressing the implementation of EFL reading class where reading are commonly classified into basic, intermediate, and advanced reading and the teaching of the three reading techniques are not well formulated and developed yet. The implementation of teaching reading techniques such as skimming, scanning, inference, and finding main idea is commonly reiterated in the different reading levels. Hence, the objective of this study is to develop an EFL reading textbook for English department students at university level by optimizing the use of local wisdom based reading content for facilitating basic reading techniques class.

2. Method

2.1 Design of the Study

The research design of this study employs a Research and Development model initiated by Borg dan Gall (2003). In the process of developing local content-based reading textbook with the emphasis on sensitizing skills is implemented through four phases. It covers planning, the development of local based reading texts and activities, tryout of the textbook, and reading textbook revision. The development process took place for one year in the academic year of 2014/2015. The tryout implementation was conducted within one semester to the 34 students in reading class at English Department University of Muhammadiyah Gresik.

2.2 Planning Phase

The formulations of standard and basic competence, indicators and objective of reading sensitizing are established in this phase. Questionnaires are administered to 34 students and 7 lecturers of English department to generate their learning need and target needs on the reading activities and goals. The results of the questionnaire are then formulated into English reading sensitizing syllabus containing standard of competence, basic competences, indicators, teaching objectives, teaching activities, assessment models and reading materials.

2.3 Development Phase

In this phase, the development of reading sensitizing materials is expanded by defining the identity of the reading materials in each chapter. Next, developing reading texts with its compelling pictures emphasizing on local content based covering famous tourism objects, traditional arts and culture, public figures, and music. Then, adapting the difficulty level of the texts into 400 until 600 words and developing sensitizing exercises are carefully accomplished. The sensitizing reading activities are distribute into recognizing sentence relations, collocation and word formation, and equivalence marker from the texts, as well as reading comprehension, interview and writing activity.

2.4 The Tryout of Local Based Sensitizing Reading Textbooks

The tryout of this local sensitizing based aimed at producing a reading material for one semester. It covers suitable reading text meets students' local content needs, relevant reading textbook with the developed syllabus and sensitizing activities and objectives in the curriculum in terms of content validity, readable reading textbooks meet students' English competence, and appropriate, acceptable English language in the reading textbook, and meaningful reading exercises and assessment with compelling format and pictures. The tryout comprises several steps. First, reading experts tryout is administered to the four English lecturers who teach reading to provide comment on the issue of validity of reading content, reading activities, exercises and consistency with the proposed local content based reading sensitizing concepts. Second, two English practitioners comment on the appropriateness and acceptability of the language in the reading textbook. Finally, students' responses toward the developed treading textbook are also drawn to measure their perception of toward the textbook.

2.5 The Revision of Reading Textbook

The revision of local based sensitizing reading textbook is made based the comments and suggestion from students, English lecturers and practitioners. The comments and suggestions rely on difficult words, difficulty level of the texts, the suitability between the content of reading texts and curriculum, language appropriateness, picture layout, suitability of pictures and texts, instruction clarity in each exercises, and reading activities.

3. Results

3.1 Needs Analysis

The results of needs analysis from the questionnaires toward the length of reading texts, from 34 students, 16 of them prefer to have 400 to 500 words, 5 of them prefer to have 300 to 400 words, and the rest 13 students prefer to have 500 to 600. On the other hand, the responses from the 7 English lectures are in line with the students' needs. They also claim that 400 to 500 words are relevant for the students. Second, toward the reading techniques they had ever learned previously, 25 students mention several familiar reading techniques such as finding main idea, skimming and scanning. The rest 9 students provide no respond as an indicator that they are not familiar with the reading techniques. Third, the response from the students whether they are familiar with reading sensitizing techniques, all 34 students stated that they are unfamiliar with it. Fourth, toward the needs of basic reading techniques, all 34 students they claim that they need to understand idea building vocabulary, sentence and, paragraph of the reading text. Again, all English lecturers also emphasized the importance of reading techniques in the textbook and all reading texts are written in English to optimize exposures acquisition. Next, toward the targeted language written in the reading text, from 34 students 30 of them prefer to have full English in all reading activities but 4 students prefer to have translated glossary at the end of the reading text. Fifth, the students' respond on reading topics, 24 students prefer to learn the familiar reading texts in their environment, 6 students like to read unfamiliar texts but they do not mention the contextual of the text, and 4 others like to read familiar text from different countries. In addition, students' responses whether they like picture reading or not, 34 students prefer to read pictured texts. Finally, all the English lecturers are in favor with the existence of pictured reading texts.

3.2 Syllabus

The result of syllabus development of sensitizing reading emphasizing on local content based is design one semester teaching program. The development of the syllabus covers character, cognitive and social aspects of the learners. The detail syllabus comprises four elements. First, the identity is formulated into *local based sensitizing reading with 2 credits for the first semester students of English Department and it has 100 minutes time allotment*. Second, the core competence is defined into *students are able to sensitize written information in the intermediate level of English in their surrounding environments*. Third, indicators and teaching objectives are formulated into *it is hoped that the students are able to comprehend written reading text, identify sentence and paragraph markers, to develop their critical thinking skills through sensitizing reading activities in intermediate level optimally*. Fourth, reading materials are design by optimizing local content reading passages in Indonesian contexts covering traditional cultures, well known tourism objects, traditional music, art and performance, and famous public figures. All topics are developed under sensitizing reading activity in order to equip them with the ability of sensitizing and developing students' literal, interpretive and critical reading skills. Finally, reading assessment activities are classified into reading skills, comprehension, and sensitizing skills with each different assessment instruments.

3.3 Development

The results of sensitizing reading textbook development by optimizing local-content based reading consist 15 chapters with approximately 8 reading exercises in it. Specifically each chapter comprises three parts, namely pre-reading, whilst reading and post reading activities. Pre-reading activities is aimed at activating students' previous knowledge through pictures observing activity and warming-up question toward the picture before entering the reading skill and comprehension activity. Meanwhile, whilst- reading activity consist of pictured reading text followed by 7 reading tasks starting from matching category and its example generated from the text, lexical cohesion, formation, sentence building, literal, interpretive, and critical comprehension, networking activity through interview related to the text to enhance communicative skills, and inference exercises. Finally, assessment and feedback on reading skills, comprehension, and sensitizing skills are administered at the post reading activities.

3.4 Tryout from Reading Experts, Practitioners and Students

The data from reading expert toward overall reading activities, curriculum, coverage, hierarchy, illustrations,

exercises, competencies, proportion, instructions, difficulty level, target users, assessments and feedbacks reveal that the average scores of these categories are 3.72. Further, it is labeled into 'good' category and is relevant to implement in the teaching of reading for the first semester EFL students' of English Department at University of Muhammadiyah Gresik. Next, the data from practitioners toward language use, diction, grammatical problems, acceptability, and appropriateness are also deemed and it is on the average score of 3.78. Then, it is interpreted as 'good' category as well. Finally, data from students after one semester implementation of teaching reading are drawn too. The average scores toward hierarchical reading material and activities, examples, difficulty level, illustrations, interest, assessment, and feedbacks are 3.77. It is then classified into good category. Revision of comments obtained from the above three different expertise on language use, grammatical errors, illustration lay out, simplicity of the language are accomplished at this stage. Finally, the comprehensive result of the development of sensitizing reading textbook using local content-based is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Example of local based sensitizing reading

4. Discussion

The overall development of sensitizing local based-reading text book directed for the first semester students of English Department at University level perform good category as it is shown in the average score of tryout and validation of 3.76 within the scale of 1 up to 4 intervals. The detailed results from reading experts, language practitioners, and learners show the average score of 3.72, 3.78 and 3.77. These data describe that the developed reading textbooks have already met students' need analysis in terms of reading interest, readability, and suitability with reading syllabus as well as fulfilled the concept of local based content development, reading hierarchy, sensitizing skills in the reading exercises, assessment and feedbacks. The major discussion reviewed in this part rely on filling the gap authentic and non-authentic reading texts controversy from the schemata theory and comprehensible input, simplification aspect of reading texts, issues of text length and picture reading views.

This study is undertaken as the pilot project in developing a reading textbook emphasizing on sensitizing reading skills using local content-based paradigm with the primary objective of penetrating the gap between authentic and non-authentic reading materials. The proposition of authentic material Mishan (2005) and Khaniya (2006) deem that the existence of authentic reading materials dominate today's foreign language teaching. Further, they also argue that artificial text does not significantly contribute students' English performance. Moreover, current study conducted by Nematollahi and Maghsoudi (2015) show that there is no significance difference between the student taught using of authentic and non authentic reading material. For addressing the issue of real English acquisition in second language context, it would be very plausible because the students have already equipped with sufficient English competence to interact with authentic reading texts. Meanwhile, from the view of comprehensible input proposed by Krashen (1981) initiated that learners acquire language when they understand the message of the source language or what we called with comprehensible input. Further, he noted that context plays an important role to figure out the complexity of grammar. Consequently, authentic reading materials would be more challenging for EFL learners to acquire meaningful comprehensible input as unfamiliar messages, culture, and English contexts are relatively different for EFL learners to portray in their thought.

Other studies conducted by Young (1999) and Richard (2000) criticize the difficulty level of the authentic material which might stimulate students' stress and strain in comprehending the texts. Next, problematic issues such as unnecessary vocabulary items, complexity of language structure become additional shortcomings of the existence of authentic reading materials. According to them simplification would be one of the possible alternatives to penetrate the above disputes. This paradigm states that comprehensible input is achieved optimally through language simplification.

The following notions support the stand of schemata theory, which claims that the enhancement of learners' reading comprehension is achieved through their personal experiences, information elsewhere, and real experiences. Stott (2001) suggests that text enjoyment the learners learn and read have to be optimized to enhance and foster comprehension. The development of pictured reading and questions session activity aimed at activating students' prior knowledge in this textbook meets the above requirements. Through the pictured reading, students would be able to comprehend better as they can connect their retention with the reading media so comprehension would be more easily achiever for novice EFL learners. In supporting the effectiveness of reading comprehension through picture texts, Jalilehvan (2012) argues that the students who are taught reading with short text with its relevant picture perform better than the students who are taught with either longer text with or without pictures. By reviewing previous research, some studies (Caputo, 2009; Free, 2004; Gerrad, 2008; and Sufiyatun, 2009) have investigated the effect of pictures in the reading texts toward learners' reading comprehension. The results of their probes show positive effect on reading comprehension. That is why the reading texts in this study are developed with picture to help learners comprehend the texts more effectively.

The issue of the length of reading texts also befalls into another point of discussion in this part. Several studies examine the influence of the length of reading texts toward learners' reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000; Mehrpour and Riazi, 2004; Chujo and Utiyama, 2005). Those researchers are in favor that the length of the texts positively influences learners' reading comprehension and reading rate. Even, empirical data also show that learners tend to avoid longer texts assignment in reading class. Further, they also claimed that when the texts are longer that 1000 words, learners' comprehension would not be optimal for intermediate readers. The result of the development of the length of the text in this study supports the above requirements. It is also in line with the learners' responses through the questionnaire with the average score of 3.77, which means the reading texts have good readability level for them.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concerned on the preliminary development of sensitizing reading textbook by emphasizing on local

content-based reading for the first semester students of English Department at University of Muhammadiyah Gresik. The researcher found good result of the three aspects of the developments on content reading bases and activities from reading experts, adequate language performance in the textbook from practitioners and good suitability the reading textbook with students' interest. Overall, this preliminary local-based sensitizing reading development was a first step in penetrating the gap in the teaching reading between authentic and non authentic texts paradigm. Furthermore, the researcher demonstrated that the involvement of larger samples and text book effectiveness might not be adequately captured.

Additional study to refine this development require further utilization of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) especially in assessing reading comprehension, fluency, speed and sensitizing skills. The integration between sensitizing reading by using local content-based developed in this study and technology would be worth-investigating. Moreover, as the results of need analysis administered in this study just involving smaller subjects so the involvement of larger samples among first semester students from different universities and background have to be carefully examined. Finally, to address the issue of the effectiveness of the sensitizing reading textbook, an experimental study have to be designed for further study.

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