THE LANGUAGE FACTORS AND SOCIO CULTURAL FACTORS CAUSING TEXT DIFFICULTY IN READING L2

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Abstract. *Tulisan ini membahas satu dari sekian banyak isu TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) yaitu isu tentang faktor-faktor yang menyebabkan sulitnya pemahaman teks dari bacaan berbahasa asing (L2). Diperkirakan ada 2 penyebab sulitnya pemahaman teks dari bacaan L2 tersebut, yakni faktor bahasa dan faktor sosial budaya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan phenomenology dan grounded theory untuk melihat dan membuktikan bahwa 2 faktor tersebut menyebabkan sulitnya pemahaman teks L2 bagi pembelajar L2. Untuk membuktikan faktor penyebab pertama, yaitu faktor bahasa, penelitian dilakukan dengan mengamati kurangnya pengetahuan pembelajar terhadap grammar L2 dan perbendaharaan kata L2. Sementara itu, schema theory digunakan untuk melihat faktor penyebab kedua, yakni faktor sosial budaya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sulitnya pemahaman teks L2 ternyata tidak hanya disebabkan karena kurangnya pengetahuan bahasa, akan tetapi latar belakang pengetahuan sosial dan budaya L2 dari pembelajar L2 juga menentukan mudah tidaknya pemahamannya terhadap teks L2.*

Kata-kata kunci: text difficulty, background knowledge, content schemata, formal schemata, cultural schemata

Introduction

The idea to do a research on the factors causing text difficulty in reading L2 is based on the experience as a second language learner as well as a second language teacher of reading L2. I see that reading L2 is not only the way of getting information from L2 written text, but this is also the matter of interpreting the L2 written text as well. I find it difficult to answer the questions concern with L2 text difficulty. Is it because of the complicated structure of the L2 text, the lack of vocabularies of L2 text, or are there any other factors apart from the language factors?

In Indonesia, grammar and structures as well as vocabularies are learned since someone goes to elementary school. By the time he goes to high school or university, the 2 language factors achieved for many years do not help him to understand L2 text easily. Soon, as he starts learning L2 literatures and other text genre, he notices that there are differences of social and cultural background of L1 and the L2. From this meta-perspective, I see that factors causing text difficulty in reading L2 can be social and cultural factors as well. That is why this research is entitled ***The Language Factors and Socio Cultural Factors Causing Text Difficulty in Reading L2.***

The purpose of the research is to elicit the learners' understanding on the language factors and socio cultural factors causing text difficulty in reading L2. Realising both the factors causing text difficulty in reading L2 will motivate them to study more on how to cope with the text difficulty in reading L2. It is expected that L2 readers will improve their language competence as well as their socio cultural competence for comprehending reading text L2 so that they will attain more motivation in learning the reading text L2 and minimize the text difficulty in reading L2.

Based on the topic, the aim, and the title, the research will view and focus the analysis and discussion on three central issues. They are: a). the lack of grammatical knowledge as one of the factors causing text difficulty in reading L2, b). the lack of vocabulary as one of the factors causing text difficulty in reading L2, and c). the lack of background knowledge of the L2 text as one of the factors causing text difficulty in reading L2.

The Lack of Grammatical Knowledge as One of the Factors Causing Text Difficulty in Reading L2

This area is considered rather difficult to prove for there are only few researches conducted on the relationship between grammar acquisition of L2 to reading performance of L2. However, an experience in teaching students who study different levels of L2 grammar proves that there is influence of grammar acquisition to the performance of reading L2. In my experience, when students who are in level 1 of L2 grammar class are given an inappropriate reading text level (reading text for upper intermediate or advance level, for example a newspaper article), they will find it difficult to understand the text. The reason is that, it is found hard for them to recognize the pattern of passive voice, conditional sentence, and indirect speech within the text. There is difficult word recognition process within the text which is closed related to the grammar well awareness of these beginner learners. This study was accompanied by further test on post test reading for level 1 L2 grammar class and post test for level 3 and 4 L2 grammar classes with the same reading text to see the influence of grammar acquisition to their reading performance. From the result I see that there is influence of lack of grammatical knowledge to the reading performance. Those with the lower level L2 grammar class could not cope with the L2 reading text and were found attain worse result for the test. This experience of teaching is in line with Uruquart and Weir's idea

(1998, p.262) that there is correlating performance on grammar/ syntax tests with performance on reading tests.

Furthermore, Bowey (1994, p.137) tries to propose evidence on the study conducted by Ehri (1979), Kennedy and Weener (1973), Sampson et al. (1982), and Tunmer and Bowey (1984) that grammatical awareness facilitates reading. The study shows that the word recognition process in reading text L2 is indeed influenced by the sensitivity to the grammatical well-formedness. The ability to gain sentence meaning from sentence structure helps students to comprehend the reading text L2 better.

The Lack of Vocabulary as One of the Factors Causing Text Difficulty in Reading L2

The acquisition of strategies for understanding and using vocabulary are viewed as relating to the vocabulary building and competence which is assumed to be connected with the high performance of reading text L2. The higher the level of an L2 reading class, the more difficult the reading L2 text learned. In reading L2 level 4 class, students in Indonesia have been introduced to different style of text (genre). This is including speech text, newspaper and magazine articles, poem and even novel. The main problem to understand the L2 text in this class is the lack of vocabulary. When someone has a very limited vocabulary, he will have never achieved a success in this reading L2 class. Some of my students in this reading class had even quitted the class and decided to move to different department because of their difficulty in understanding the L2 reading text which is related to their lack of vocabulary. Notwithstanding, vocabulary is the key point to understand the meaning in a sentence, paragraph, or text. An L2 learner of course needs time to master and memorize the vocabulary of L2 as well as to understand how to use it in an appropriate way. Cook (2001, p.72) assumes "words are multi faceted; we don't know a word properly until we have learnt its form, its different types of meaning and the ways in which it is used in sentences."

Guiness (2005, p. 264) proposes some research conducted by Bishop and Edmundson (1987), Bishop and Adams (1990), and Stothard et.al.(1998) to prove that there is relationship between mastering vocabulary and good reading performance. It was found that receptive vocabulary test were the most highly correlated to all three reading skills: decoding, spelling, and reading comprehension. Further research conducted by Bishop and Beitchman (2001) showed that there is a link between

vocabulary and reading. It is assumed that vocabulary is controlled in most studies on reading predictors. And it is obvious then that without mastering adequate vocabulary, someone will face difficulty in understanding L2 text because aspects of text are sentences composed of vocabularies which carry the meaning in the sentence structures. Without mastering lexis there will be difficulty in comprehending L2 text.

The Lack of Background Knowledge as One of the Factors Causing Text Difficulty in Reading L2

In this section, the lack of background knowledge of L2 and its impact on the text difficulty in reading L2 is observed. The literature review on the schema theory covering content schema, formal schema, and cultural schema and its link to text difficulty in reading L2 is applied.

First of all, I would like to give one example concerning with the relation of this lack of background knowledge and comprehending reading L2 text. When friends and I were undergraduate students and were engaging with our novel class, we found it was difficult to understand 'The Scarlet Letter," a novel written by an American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne. We had learned English for 7 years at the time, had learned grammar and vocabulary level 4 completely, but we needed time to fully understand the novel. Soon we realised that it was difficult to understand the novel without knowing who wrote this novel, when this novel was written, and where it was written. It was also difficult to understand the novel without knowing what 'the scarlet letter' symbolises. Moreover, this English novel (L2 novel) is of course very different from Indonesian novel (L1 novel) as it is presented in a quite different socio cultural atmosphere. The different rhetorical structure of the L1 (Indonesian) and L2 (English) indeed causes the difficulty in understanding the L2 text (the Scarlet Letter). We see that there is socio cultural factors beyond the text that we need to understand first. The mental structures of these L1 and L2 texts are different, and it causes this difficulty.

The problem we faced is now solved as I learn that reading L2 text is based on the mastering of its background knowledge which is related to the schema theory. In his book, Uruquart and Weir (1998, p.71) state that in the reading literature, different types of schemata are suggested to acquire. They refer to Carrell's (1983) classification of the schemata, i.e   (a) content schemata, which is relating to the content of a text read, (b) formal schemata, which is relating to the rhetorical structure of the text, and (c)

cultural schemata, which is related to general aspects of cultural knowledge shared by large sections of socio cultural population.

In our case, to the **content schemata**, we need to know that the 'scarlet letter' is a badge initialled "A" which means adultery. This "A" letter is in a bright red colour. This badge was worn by a woman who had done adultery and had refused to confess with whom she did it. Without the content of the text read, we would never know what means by "The Scarlet Letter." The content of the text to some extent gives information about what is being talked and discussed in an L2 reading text. The content of the text is relating to who is being talked, what is being talked, and why it is being talked.

To the **formal schemata**, the different rhetorical structure between English structure (L2 structure) used in the language of the novel and L1 structure makes us difficult to read and understand the novel easily. The different forms and ways to express the past, present, and future events and activities between English (L2) and Indonesian (L1) make it difficult to understand the novel. The different expression and structure to argue, to show evidence, to persuade, to describe, to narrate, etc. between L1 and L2 causes the difficulty in comprehending this novel (the L2 text). This is in line with Grabe (2009, p. 139) who states that different society and cultural groups will develop different ways to carry out social roles through texts. There are different text genres and their uses between L1 and L2 settings. Letters as well as editorials vary across cultures. These different cultures have different counts on arguments, evidences, persuasion, etc. To support his statements, Grabe mentions a research on contrastive rhetoric conducted by Connor (1996), Kaplan (2005), and Hudson (2007), which represents how and why text vary across different L1 settings.

From the **cultural schemata**, text within the novel could be interpreted differently because of historical period and because of different socio cultural groups of readership. Without knowing that *The Scarlet Letter*'s setting is Puritanism era and that the writer would like to criticise the domination of church towards society's behaviour and life at the time, it is difficult to interpret why this woman should live in her solitary wearing the scarlet letter of "A". This is in line with Montgomery's idea (1992, p.10) that interpretative variation suggests the social circumstances in which a text is produced and interpreted. And the expectation the readers bring to it can significantly affect the meaning.

Finding

From the analysis and examples of experiences in teaching and learning reading L2 abovementioned, we can see that lack of vocabulary and lack of grammatical knowledge are relating to the language factors causing text difficulty in reading L2. It has been proved by previous researches conducted by the experts mentioned.

Furthermore, from the schema theory, we find that a text is difficult to understand when we have no experience about what the text is about or concerning with. This is obvious that information about the theme and type of genre of the text is vital. Without knowing that the content of a text is about religion, economics, politics, engineering, agriculture, sociology, geography, mathematics, biology, physics, etc., an L2 learner will find it difficult to understand the L2 text. (Carrell, 1998, p. 141)

The difference of rhetorical structure between L1 and L2 and the cultural schema relating to the socio cultural expectation of political, religious, ethnic, economic, and social institutions within the text which is influenced by the difference of cultures play an important role in understanding the L2 text as well.

In line with this finding, Cook (2001, pp.91-92) believes that Carrell sees the importance of background knowledge for reading activities. To him the text difficulty is not only caused by lack of language ability, but it is also caused by 'cognitive deficit' which is the background information that natives automatically read into the L2. Cook mentions the tests and researches conducted by Long and Hardings-Esch (1977), Favreau and Segalowitz (1982), and Haynes and Carr (1990), to underline that text difficulty in the reading L2 is not only caused by the lack of language proficiency, but it is also caused by the background information through script and the mental structures of the text.

Conclusion

From the teaching and learning experienced as well as the preceding researches conducted and the theory generalized, it can be concluded that there are two basic factors causing text difficulty in reading L2. These factors are the language factors, i.e the lack of grammatical knowledge and the lack of vocabulary, and the socio cultural factors which are related to the lack of background knowledge or schemata.

In addition, based on this finding it can be suggested that L2 reading learners should be aware that there is a need to improve and reinforce grammar and vocabulary knowledge

before they read L2 text. They are also expected to bear in mind that they could not ignore the socio cultural factors which are beyond the text and play an important role in comprehending reading L2 text.

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