



# THE STUDY AND ANALYSIS OF READING DIFFICULTIES OF THE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** *The never ending argument among linguists and teachers about whether reading difficulties of the non-speakers of English are a reading problem or a language problem is an interesting study to start with. This was one of the questions examined in the study leading to the development of an ESP syllabus for undergraduate students at Bogor Agricultural University (IPB). Firstly, this paper outlines the current English course at IPB where the focus of language teaching is on teaching grammar and reading. Secondly, it looks at the theoretical background and the development of ESP as well as the role of the ESP teachers which is different from the role of the General English teachers. Since reading is the only target skill students need to acquire, this paper looks at the theory of reading and outlines necessary reading skills and examines a ‘good’ reading teacher. Fourthly, this paper consists of a study and its analysis into whether difficulties in reading are a reading problem or a language problem. The findings are expected to give a clearer idea to the teachers of reading about the problems encountered by the students in reading English texts so that they can decide whether the focus of the course should be on grammar development or reading development. Finally, this paper discusses several types of syllabi as well as relating to the importance of needs analysis in designing a course, and suggests an outline syllabus for the IPB students i.e. the proportional syllabus including the profile of communication needs, aims and objectives of the course, language content, and the syllabus content.*

*Keywords: ESP, Syllabus, Reading Problem, Language Problem, Reading Skills*

## AIM OF THE STUDY

For the first year of undergraduate students at IPB (Bogor Agricultural University), English is a compulsory one-semester subject.

The reason for this compulsory English course is an attempt to try to make sure that students can cope later with the required reading for their specialist courses. Many of these scientific textbooks and journals which they will be expected to read are in English where no-Indonesian translations are rarely available.

At the end of the current courses at IPB, most students still find difficulty in reading the English scientific texts. Thus, it can be assumed that the current course for English is inadequate in many ways.

The purposes of this study are to investigate current thinking in ESP English for Special Purposes, to examine factors involved in efficient reading, to investigate



difficulties students may find in coping with scientific texts, and so investigate methods of needs analysis, type of syllabus appropriate for IPB students and finally to propose a new reading syllabus.

## **THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE UNIT AT IPB**

### **The Students**

There are approximately 3500 first year students at Bogor Agricultural University (Institut Pertanian Bogor; referred to as IPB) who are required to take English for one semester every year. The students come from all parts of Indonesia, from both urban and rural areas. The age range is 18 to 19 years old and they studied English for six year in the secondary and senior high school. Therefore, they already have some basic knowledge of English before they take the subject in the university. Besides, they also have some basic knowledge of science since their major of study in senior high school is pure science. The English level of the students varies from elementary to post intermediate with a few students who are at the advanced level. The level of majority of the students could be regarded as elementary. Most find English difficult especially when they have to do some reading texts. This may be due to the fact that when they were still in secondary and senior high school, they were exposed only to the grammar –translation method. As some students may not have any motivation. They do not take English seriously. As a result, when they finish their senior education and enter IPB, their grasp of English is still poor.

### **The Staff**

There are 14 senior and junior members on the staff in English Language Unit. Most of the senior staff have taught English for many years and are experienced in English language teaching. Although called ESP teachers (i.e. they teach English to Agricultural students), none of the staff is a subject specialist. For this reason, problems in dealing with these scientific texts (agricultural texts) often arise.

### **The Present Course**

The first year course, in which all subjects are compulsory, IPB regards as a period of revision and upgrading of subjects such as General Physics, Chemistry, English, etc. The specialized agricultural courses do not begin until the second year. English, thus, is taught prior to the specialized courses.

English is taught for four hours a week for 16 weeks during the semester. In the first two hours (which are for lectures), there is a ratio of lecturer to 150 students and in the last two hours (for tutorials) the ratio is 1:50-55.

At the present time, the focus of the English language course is on reading; the rational for teaching grammar to the students is to review their basic knowledge of English grammar so they can use this knowledge to help them understand the texts easily and clearly.

The procedure for teaching grammar is that the students are given the patterns of each structure, such as the relative clause, as well as some examples and exercises. They are also given the meaning and the usage of the structure.



The procedure of teaching reading is as follows: The students are given a compilation of scientific texts related to their subjects taken from published ESP textbooks e.g. English in Focus Series/Nucleus Series/Basic Scientific English, etc. the teacher reads the paragraphs and gives the main ideas of each paragraph. Sometimes the patterns of the sentences are analyzed to make them clearly understood. The last step is giving exercises based on the text to be discussed in tutorials. The types of exercises are multiple choice, true or false, completing, sentences, etc.

The teachers in the teaching learning process, in IPB are trying to use English as much as possible; however, Indonesian is still used. This they think the students need the translation. This is done due to the fact that the students' English competence is still low. If the teachers use Indonesian in explaining things the students will understand them easily and clearly. The students' motivation is not high and the teachers might expect them to feel frustrated and thus perform poorly if they do not have the support of Indonesian.

At the present time, apart from using the ESP texts in the teaching/learning process, the teachers are still unaware of the ESP thinking which is different from General English. Therefore, in the next chapter, I will present the ESP theoretical background and the role of ESP teachers to draw teachers' attention to what an ESP course is.

## WHAT IS ESP?

Strevens (1988: 1) defines ESP as "a particular case of the general category of special purpose language teaching". In this definition of ESP, he distinguishes between four absolute and two variable characteristics.

### a. Absolute Characteristics of ESP

ESP consists of English language teaching, which is:

1. Designed to meet the specific needs of the learner.
2. Related in content (i.e. in its theme and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities.
3. Centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc.
4. In contrast with "General English"

### b. Variable Characteristics of ESP

ESP may be but is not necessarily:

1. Restricted as to the language skills to be learned.
2. Taught according to any pre-ordained methodology i. e. it is not restricted to any particular methodology".

Strevens' view of ESP, in this case EST (English for Science and Technology), is that it is special and different from other types of English language learning because Scientific English' possesses three sets of features. Firstly, it comprises the linguistic rules for creating scientific texts, for example the frequent use of the passive, subordinate clauses, etc. but it does not use different tenses, modal, clauses structures, from normal English: it just uses a particular, unfamiliar mixture of well-know known grammatical devices. Secondly, it comprises the vocabulary and terminology of the



particular scientific discipline. Teaching vocabulary may not be a problem, since the students may already know the concepts of science. Scientific vocabulary in English may closely resemble the terms in their language and thus may not cause difficulty. One problem however might come from the teachers who are EFL but clearly not trained science teachers and therefore they may be unfamiliar with the concepts of science and the specific terms used in the text. Thirdly, ESP comprises the purposes of science –the rhetoric, the discourse, “the scientificness” of the text which are the product of ‘knowledge science’, and they cannot easily be listed, described and taught.

It can be seen that the nature of ESP are broadly similar. Before examining the points in more detail, it may be useful to look how ESP has developed.

## WHAT IS READING

Reading has always had a prominent place in the teaching of English, but views of the nature of reading have changed widely.

Mackay *et al* (1979) mentioned that the good reader should hunt for clues in the text, which is presented, although not necessarily processed in a linear manner. The major clues to the message are to be found in word recognition, derivational and inflectional morphemes and knowledge of exposition techniques such as definition, explanation, comparison and figurative meaning.

These views of reading reflect the early bottom-up model of reading, which was seen mainly as a decoding process. Intended meaning is reconstructed by building up a meaning for the text from the smallest textual units at the ‘bottom’ (letters and words) to larger and larger units at the ‘top’ (phrases, clauses and inter sentential linkages).

Even at this time, there was some recognition that background knowledge was important too. While meaning is conveyed by words, meaning is not in the words themselves. Meaning exists in the thinking of the reader, as a result of previous experience, said Daines (1982). The role of background knowledge in reading comprehension has been formalized as Schemata Theory. In Schemata Theory, the text does not carry meaning in itself. A text provides directions for readers as to how they may retrieve or construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge.

## READING SKILLS

Since reading is a constant process of guessing, the students should be taught to use what they know to understand unknown elements, whether these are ideas or simple words.

The reading skills given to the students are as follows:

1. Skimming
2. Scanning
3. Pronoun Referents
4. Recognizing Parts of Speech
5. Recognizing suffixes and prefixes
6. Identifying Main Ideas
7. Guessing Meaning from Contexts
8. Reading graphs, tables, diagrams



9. Transferring Information
10. Text Organizations: Listing, Process, Cause – effect, Comparison and Contrast, Definition and Exemplification and Classification

## **READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A READING PROBLEM OR A LANGUAGE PROBLEM?**

There is clearly a relationship between linguistic ability and reading comprehension. Allen (1978) points out that the feature of the reading process is similar to the idea of 'expectancy' where the students have the ability to guess what should come next in connected sentences. Syntactic items such as sequence signals (conjunctive adverbs, pronouns, etc) play an important part in providing such 'expectancy' clues.

Many students fail to read adequately in the foreign language, they cannot fully understand what they read and they have to read at a slower rate (Alderson 1984). A number of studies have been carried out on the students' performance in reading in the foreign language, in this case English, to try to find whether the difficulties lay in lack of reading skills or insufficient linguistic ability.

Jolly (1978) claims that success in reading in a foreign language depends on the ability to read in the native language. In other words, students need to transfer their reading skills or strategies in the native language in order to be able to read sufficiently in the foreign language. In this case, students do not need to learn new reading skills in the foreign language. Therefore, if students fail to read efficiently and effectively in the foreign language, it is because they either do not possess enough native language reading skills or they have failed to transfer them.

Coady (1979) also asserts that the foreign language reading problems is a reading. He also pointed out that because students have poor reading habits in their native language they cannot transfer their reading ability in native language to read in the foreign language.

Furthermore, Clarke (1975) states that if the reading process is basically the same in all languages, then it can be expected that good native language readers will be good second language readers. While they are reading in the foreign language, they will employ similar strategies to when they are reading in the native language. Cummins (1976) also made the assumption that students who are proficient readers in the native language are more likely to become good readers in the foreign language.

However, on their research, Ulijin and Kmepen (1978) found that poor foreign language reading comprehension is not due to insufficient knowledge of grammar but to lack of conceptual knowledge i. e. the meanings of words and subject knowledge. Several other studies stress the importance of familiarity with vocabulary.

From these different points of view on poor performance in reading in the foreign language, we could say that it can be considered both as a reading problem and a language problem with more evidence that it is a language problem for low levels of language competence, than a reading problem. Even though there have been many studies done, the answer as to whether it is a reading problem or a language problem is still equivocal and tentative. There is a need for further studies on this matter (Alderson 1984).



Based on the view mentioned above, it is suggested that we should carefully consider both factors i. e. reading problems and language problems which effect foreign language reading.

If poor performance in reading in the foreign language is a reading problem, the focus of teaching should be in teaching the reading skills or strategies in order to help students read better in the foreign language. However, if poor performance in reading in the foreign language is a language problem, the focus of teaching should be in improving language knowledge. Therefore, there would be more concern with teaching language competence rather than reading strategies or skills.

To investigate whether the reading problems of the Indonesian students are due to a lack of reading skills or poor linguistic competence, it was decided to do a short study. It is to this study I know turn.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

The aim of the study is to investigate the difficulties students encountered while reading English scientific texts, and to investigate whether the reading problem is a reading problem or a language problem. The study used a questionnaire as the instrument to get the information needed.

### **Rationale for using a questionnaire**

#### **1. Purpose**

The purpose of designing and administering the questionnaire was to identify the difficulties and the cause of difficulties students believed they had in their prescribed reading.

#### **2. Respondents**

The questionnaire was administered students taking English in the first and second semester. They were chosen to their bad scores in English. They got either D or Fail. Therefore, complete information regarding their difficulties in learning can be obtained. Then this will help the teachers in designing the new materials suitable for the student's level, interest and need.

#### **3. Reasons**

The questionnaire form was chosen because it is considered to be the best tool in getting information relevant to the study with high reliability and validity. All the questions in this questionnaire are closed questions except the last question where the respondent might add some more information not found in the questionnaire. Since the respondents have no alternative in answering the questions, it is expected to get as much relevant information as possible.

#### **4. Questionnaire**

The questionnaire consists of 30 questions grouped into five sections. A number of questions appear in slightly different forms in more than one section, so that a more rounded view of a problem might be attained.





## DATA ANALYSIS

The respondents think that their reading problems in English are a language problem (72%). They assumed that their basic reading skills in their native language would help them in reading the target language. However, because their linguistic competence was still poor, this would affect their process of understanding a text. Alderson (1984) suggests that foreign language readers will not be able to read as well as in the foreign language as their first language until they have reached a threshold level of competence in that foreign language.

1. In order to find the text difficulty faced by students, all respondents (87%) are very well aware of the extreme importance of background knowledge in reading scientific texts. This is supported by Kellerman (1981) and Danies (1982), who suggest that background knowledge is important in the process of understanding a text. Furthermore, Nation and Coady (1986) also state that good readers take advantage of background knowledge of subject matter in processing the text and in creating an expectation about the kind of vocabulary that will occur.
2. Although topic alone does not necessarily make a text difficult, 83% of the respondents agree that the complexity of the concepts expressed create a great deal of difficulty. This may result from their lack of background knowledge of the text.
3. The respondents also think that a scientific text is more difficult to read than a general text. This may be due to differences between the features of scientific text and general text. Scientific texts have the following characteristics (Stevens, 1980):
  - a. Quantification, formulae and symbols;
  - b. Greek and Latin roots and affixes;
  - c. Precise and frequent use of logical-grammatical connectors, such as consequent, etc;
  - d. Long nominal group
  - e. Frequent use of passive;
  - f. The grammar and lexis needed for the rhetoric of science i.e. for description, etc.
  - g. Special lexis.

General texts do not usually have such characteristics. As mentioned earlier, however, the differences may be exaggerated. Lack of background knowledge is more likely to contribute to this and also to unfamiliar vocabulary.

4. Moreover, 80% of respondents also agree that if a reader's vocabulary is limited, this makes a text difficult. Adams (1982) in his study on the recognition of unfamiliar vocabulary found that giving learners information about the topic of a passage before they read it resulted in significantly higher scores on guessing the meanings of nonsense words in the texts.
5. It can be seen that one difficulty most respondents isolated understood idiomatic expressions. Most of the respondents (68%) have difficulty in dealing with idiomatic expressions. There is an assumption that this difficulty appears because the students cannot recognize the idiom. Therefore, it is suggested that the students



should have experience in dealing with these idiomatic expressions.

6. The other factor which almost all respondents (72%) think makes the text difficult is their lack of grammatical knowledge.
7. 56% of the respondents do the feel that long and complex sentences make the text difficult to read. This fits in with the study done by Berman (1984) in her study on syntactic components of the foreign language reading process. She found that the students had difficulty with long and complex sentences. For example, when they had to read a long and complex sentence, they were reported as having misinterpreted or not having understood at all the core of the sentence. Most of the respondents actively look for main ideas and supporting ideas in the reading process. They also try to predict the content of the text. However, most of the respondents (87%) agree that they only occasionally can remember and connect one part of sentences of the text to what follows it. This may result from uncertain usage of sentence connectors.
8. Most of the respondents (87%) do not see much difficulty in finding general and specific statements. This is supported by the previous findings. It is shown that the respondents actively find main idea and supporting ideas while they are reading. In general, they believe they can identify topic sentences, key words and content of text.
9. However, they cannot always identify the grammatical and lexical devices (56%) and text organization (70%). In his studies on linguistic competence of practiced and unpracticed readers, Cooper (1984) found that unpracticed readers had difficulty in understanding grammatical and lexical devices. This would suggest that a reasonable amount of time should be devoted to teaching grammatical and lexical devices.
10. In his study, he also found that the unpracticed readers had difficulty in understanding the text organization. This might be due to the unfamiliarity of the readers with typical patterns of rhetorical organization and argument in English texts. The respondents also might have the same problem with this as they are not very familiar yet with academic texts. However, whether the organization of text has a major effect on text difficulty is still doubtful. As mentioned earlier most respondents agree that lack of grammatical knowledge contributes to text difficulty with fewer feeling that long complex sentences were the problem. Most of the respondents do not consider that sentence connectors (92%), suffix/prefix (84%) and subordinators (88%) will greatly affect their understanding of English scientific texts.
11. As mentioned before, there are many words the respondents find difficult. It was useful also to look at how respondents tackled unknown words.
12. It can be seen that a number of different strategies are used by the respondents in dealing with difficult words. Firstly, they (88%) work out the meanings of difficult words context. If they cannot find the meaning, they (84%) will use the second strategy i.e. guessing.
13. If they also cannot guess the meaning of the difficult words, they (80%) will use a dictionary to find the meanings. 84% of the respondents use a dictionary to look up some of the words and 32% of them use it only to look up a few difficult words. However, only 28% of them use a dictionary to look up most of the difficult words.





14. Concerning the reading ability in native language and target language, only one respondent thinks that his reading ability in English is very good.
15. Most think that their ability in understanding English scientific texts is between good (10%) and moderate (60%) and only a few of them (27%) are poor readers.
16. They feel they have few problems in taking note while reading, rating their ability good (28%) and moderate (56%).
17. Most of the respondents (92%) think that their ability to read in their native language is between good and moderate, with only 8% of the respondents thinking that their reading in their native language is bad. At the same time, most of the respondents (84%) also think that their reading ability in English is between moderate and good.
18. There was an assumption that the success of foreign language reading depended on the reading ability of first language (Coady 1976 and Jolly 1978). This is, however, contradictory to what the respondents think about this matter. 23% of the respondents disagree that their reading ability in their native language will support them in reading in the target language.
19. 60% of the respondents read English scientific texts differently from their native language. The differences are comprehension, reading speed and concentration. Besides closed questions, the respondents were asked to give any comments regarding the subject. Twenty-five students were giving their comments regarding the subject. Twenty-five students were giving their comments on the following areas:
  20. 70% of the respondents enjoyed learning English although they thought that it is a difficult subject. As a matter of fact, if the students have good motivation, they can learn it more easily. Therefore, it is hoped that if they have to repeat the subject in the next semester, they can learn it much better and improve their scores.
  21. 93% of the respondents consider that English is as important as the other subjects. Therefore, it is expected that the way they learn English is the same way as they learn the others. In other words, they should learn English as seriously as they learn the other subjects.
  22. However, 56% of the respondents consider that English is a subject which very difficult to learn. Regarding the percentage, we can say that to some students it is actually a difficult subject but to some others it is not that difficult.
  23. 77% of the respondents didn't think that learning English is stressful. Therefore, it indicates that they enjoyed learning English and didn't feel the heavy burden.
  24. Moreover, 60% didn't feel that the teaching learning process is boring. However, since 40% felt that it is a boring lesson, the teacher must pay attention to the way they teach. They should be able to make the classroom activities varied and stimulate the students to be more active and not just remain passive during the class.
  25. Although they enjoyed learning English and didn't consider it as a difficult subject, 57% agree that they actually didn't have enough time to learn English seriously as they must also concentrate on other subjects such as Chemistry, Statistics, etc. Therefore, the teacher should design the materials as practical as possible so with the available time the students get as much information as required. As a result, they can achieve a good score in English.



It is obvious that vocabulary plays an important role for the students to understand English sufficiently. The second place is the grammar. Probably when they were in Junior High School or Senior High School, they didn't pay attention to the grammar (lack of interest) so when they were exposed to the grammar in TPB they found difficulties in coping with it. Based on this information, the teacher should find a way in improving the students' vocabulary and grammar.

## **SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS**

Although this study was conducted with students of a slightly higher level than the IPB students, a number of relevant factors have emerged which must be remembered when designing the syllabus.

The factors are as follows:

1. The respondents agree that reading problems they encounter while reading scientific texts are more of a language problem than a reading problem but both need to be taken into account. Therefore, it is suggested that their grammatical knowledge should be upgraded as well as their reading skills trained.
2. The respondents consider that background knowledge of the text content plays an important role in helping them understanding the text. Therefore, the selection of text materials should be carefully chosen with an awareness of their initial background knowledge in mind.
3. Since scientific texts are regarded as more difficult than general texts, at the beginning of the course, the students will be introduced to simple general science texts and gradually to more authentic texts with a wider range of topic.
4. The respondents believe that they cannot understand the text because their vocabulary is limited. Therefore, a number of words-attack skills should be introduced to the students so they can enlarge their vocabulary.
5. The respondents also believe that grammatical knowledge at the discourse level is very important. So some attempts must be made to analyze complex sentences, to identify sentence connectors and to recognize different rhetorical organization in order to help them in reading the English texts.

Having identified some of the problems, now it is time to turn to the consideration of what a syllabus is and how an appropriate one might be designed.

## **AIMS OF THE COURSE**

### **Aims**

The students in this course will

1. Develop a range of reading skills which enable them to read and understand English scientific textbooks and journals effectively and efficiently.
2. Develop a range of important English grammar structures as a supporting factor in helping them read and understand the textbooks and journals mentioned above.



Therefore, after completing the course, the students are expected to be independent readers as they start to read their acquired reading.

## THE CONTENT

### Reading Skills

The reading skills appropriate for the students are as follows:

1. Finding the topic sentences of each paragraph.
2. Finding key words or key ideas in the text and identifying main or important points.
3. Distinguishing the main ideas from supporting details.
4. Recognizing the discourse markers.
5. Deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items through contextual clues and understanding word formation and derivation.
6. Predicting or guessing the content of text through skimming and scanning.
7. Understanding relations between parts of a text through reference, the use of discourse, and lexical cohesive devices of synonym and antonym.
8. Recognizing and understanding the function of the text by recognizing signals of sequence of events, discourse organization and the writer's point of view.
9. Recognizing functional value of a text i.e. listing, process, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, definition and exemplification, and classification.
10. Making use of structural clues such as the parts of speech and morphological information such as prefixes and suffixes.
11. Making inferences from contexts.
12. Understanding graphs and tables
13. Transferring information from texts to diagrams.
14. Distinguishing facts from opinion

### Grammatical content

1. Tenses
2. Noun Phrases
3. Noun Clause, Adjective Clause and Adverb Clause

### Text Materials

As mentioned earlier, one of the characteristics of an ESP Course is the use of authentic materials. However, in the case of IPB students, these authentic materials may be too difficult for the students to use even though the materials are related to their field. Therefore, it is suggested that at the beginning of course, simplified materials taken from the published materials should be introduced to the students as they become more proficient.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reading skills are considered to be the most important skills needed by the IPB students since their target is to be able to read English textbooks and journals during their study. From the study done, it can be seen that reading difficulties are both a



language problem and a reading problem.

Grammar is also considered to be important to teach to the students because their knowledge of English grammar will help them in reading their English textbooks and journals.

Therefore, a combination of a skill-based syllabus and a grammatical syllabus is considered to be appropriate for the IPB students despite all the constraints such as the very large number of students in one class, etc.

Furthermore, it is called an ESP reading syllabus because it is directly concerned with the specific purpose for which the students need to learn English i.e. reading. It is recommended that materials to be used in the teaching/learning process are both simplified and authentic English scientific texts, related to the learners' field of study.

One recommendation would be the need to consult with the subject teachers in order to know what required reading they expect from the students.

The final recommendation would be for ESP teacher training for the English staff at IPB so they will be more aware of the theoretical base on which the syllabus is designed, the reading skills and the integration of grammar with the reading skills as part of the teaching learning process and also to take into account of the students' level of linguistic competence and background knowledge when they enter the English course so their target needs may be achieved successfully.

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