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Exploring Indonesian EFL Students' Reading Strategies for Economics Texts

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the types of Indonesian EFL students' strategies to comprehend the economics texts. To identify the types of strategies, retrospections and reading comprehension tests were adopted and analyzed. The results revealed that most students with a low level of English proficiency remained more dependent on the bottom-up strategies than top-down strategies. However, using the bottom-up strategies had facilitated the students comprehend the economics texts. Thus, in spite of its limitation, the study has some implications to ESAP reading in EFL classrooms.

Key words: ESAP, reading comprehension, EFL, retrospection, bottom-up strategies, top-down strategies

Introduction

Most Indonesian EFL students at a university level are provided a course of reading comprehension for *English for Specific Academic Purposes* (ESAP). This is very imperative because university students have to read journals and other references related to their courses. In order to be able to read academic texts in ESAP, EFL students are required to have reading strategies skills (Nuttall, 1982). They are expected to be skillful readers who have the same reading competence as skillful native readers. Skillful readers, unlike unskilled readers, can apply more strategies more effectively (Barnett, 1988). Moreover, EFL students at the faculty of economics are requested to understand "the subject-context" expressed in English (Jordan, 1997). These conditions become bearers for most EFL students because of their poor strategies and low level of English proficiency. Yet, they should study ESAP courses, such as reading economics texts as one of the compulsory courses determined by the faculty. Very few studies, however, have examined EFL students' strategies to deal with this problem. Therefore, an empirical study needs to be conducted in order to understand how EFL students cope with their problems and how to develop their reading strategies.

Students' Reading Strategies for Comprehension

In the reading literature, some researchers have affirmed that reading strategies have positive impacts on comprehension. Rusciolelli (1995), who conducted a study with college Spanish students, found that skimming, for example, proved most useful strategies to students. She identified that the subjects could comprehend a text better by using skimming compared to re-reading. The finding may suggest that skimming as the top down strategy is more helpful than re-reading as the bottom-up strategy. Similarly, Carrell (1991), who investigated the strategy employed by the subjects of two groups: at lower proficiency and higher proficiency levels, found that the subjects with higher proficiency level who invoked global strategies, such as activating background knowledge and recognizing text organization comprehended texts were more successful than the subjects with lower proficiency level who used the bottom-up strategies, such as focusing on grammatical structures and word meaning. The results of the above studies, however, appear to be still suggestive rather than definitive because there is also evidence from another study revealing that students at high proficiency level in a foreign language still make use of the bottom-up strategies.

Alderson (1984, p.20) strongly remarked in his study that "proficiency in the foreign language was more closely associated with foreign language reading ability and thus reading problems are due to language problems of that language." In other words, EFL students with a low level of English proficiency may not be able to use reading strategies such as predicting and hypothesizing.

Laufer & Sim (1985) provided strong supports to the importance of the foreign language proficiency for EFL reading. Similarly, Davis & Bistodeu (1993), who investigated whether L1 and L2 reading processes were different from the subjects of native readers of French and English, supported to the threshold hypothesis. They found that the foreign language itself had a powerful impact on the psychological processing during L2 reading and the low level of linguistic proficiency resulted in much greater attention to the bottom-up strategies. On the other hand, Li & Munby (1996), who conducted their study with EFL students with a high proficiency level in English, found that the students kept translating to comprehend a text. Findings of these studies are still contradictory and remain questionable whether good readers or poor readers invoked the top-down, the bottom-up or both strategies. The evidence may trigger further study on what strategies invoked by EFL students at a university level to comprehend academic texts as a part of ESAP. Therefore, a further study is still needed to identify what types of reading strategies for comprehension invoked by EFL students, and this study attempted to investigate this problem focusing on EFL students with a low proficiency level in Indonesian setting.

Methods

Research Design

This study was designed to explore what reading strategies were invoked by Indonesian EFL students. They were given reading strategy questionnaires, called *retrospection*, and *short answers reading comprehension test.*

Subjects

The respondents were students who took English for ESAP, particularly reading comprehension. Before taking ESAP, they had learnt General English (GE). However, their language proficiency was still at below threshold level—their TOEFL scores at the range of 350-400.

Instruments

This study used two types of instruments: *Reading comprehension test with short answers* and *Retrospection*. The first instrument was a *reading comprehension test* with some questions related to the main idea, supporting ideas, inferences, and patterns of paragraphs. These questions could elicit to what extent the students' responses were accurate. To respond these questions, the subjects were requested to provide short answers as their responses to the given questions. After they responded to the given questions, they were asked to explain ways or strategies used when reading the texts. This type of obtaining students' responses was called *Retrospection* as the second instrument of the study. Retrospection is one of the verbal reports used as a means of gaining insight into the reading process in the mind of a reader; therefore, it is very useful for giving insight into strategy used in reading. Some researchers suggest that there are ways in which retrospective verbal reports can be significant to provide insightful and valid data. For example, Cohen (1986, p. 133) state that "retrospection can be immediate (e.g. within, say an hour of the reading) or delayed (a few hours, days or even a week after the reading). This is supported by Dhieb-Henia (2003, p. 393) who argues that "immediate retrospection, which is completed directly after reading task, ensure that the subjects' short-term memory can be accessed and its content reported, yet guarantees a minimum of interference with the reading process." In the present study, the immediate retrospection was applied to obtain insights into reading strategies for identifying the main idea, making inferences, and recognizing patterns of paragraphs.

Data Analysis

The data from the retrospection and the reading comprehension test were collected and analyzed qualitatively through some procedures. First, the data were classified into several types of reading strategies. In this method, the researcher carefully read the retrospection for possible codes or categories relevant to the aim of the study. Second, some reading strategies invoked by the students were analyzed to assess the accuracy of answering given questions, as some previous researchers also remarked that there were apparently relations between certain types of reading strategies and successful or unsuccessful EFL reading (Pani, 2004). In the current study, the "accuracy" refers to the ability of the subjects to identify the main idea and supporting ideas, to make inferences, and to recognize the patterns of paragraph.

Results

The data from the retrospections were classified into some types of reading strategies for (1) identifying the main idea, (2) making inferences, and (3) recognizing patterns of paragraphs. After classifying the types of strategies invoked by the students, the accuracy of comprehension was presented.

1. Types of Reading Strategies for Identifying the Main Idea

When the students were asked what reading strategies were used for identifying the main idea, they informed that they used similar bottom-up reading strategies such as, *reading sentence by sentence, re-reading, translating, recognizing cohesive devices* and *using a dictionary* for identifying the main idea. Some used *webbing;* and few used *washing plus reading sentence by sentence.* Nevertheless, the results of the analysis of the students' accuracy were low. For example, less than 50% of the students were able to identify the main idea accurately by using *translating* and *reading sentence by sentence* strategies. 28% of them could identify the main idea accurately by using *cohesive devices* as the bottom-up strategy and using *cohesive devices plus webbing* as the interactive strategy. Only 12 % could identify the main idea correctly by using *webbing plus reading sentence by sentence* strategies.

2. Types of Reading Strategies for Inferences

When the students were asked the strategies used for inferences, they informed that they employed the bottom-up strategies: *reading sentence by sentence, re-reading, translating, paraphrasing, and using cohesive devices.* Some used *webbing* and *webbing plus sentence by sentence or re-reading.*

The analysis of the accuracy in drawing conclusions revealed that 30% of the students could make inferences accurately. When using *cohesive devices*, and *webbing plus cohesive devices*, most (70%) students were able to draw conclusion accurately.

3. Types of Reading Strategies for Patterns

The two bottom-up strategies, *paraphrasing* and *reading sentence by sentence,* were invoked by most students for recognizing patterns of paragraphs. A few made use of *cohesive devices* as the other strategy. With regard to accuracy, the results revealed that 25 % of the students could recognize the organization of the paragraph correctly by *paraphrasing, re-reading* or *translating*, while 75 % of the students employed *cohesive devices* for recognizing the organization of the paragraph.

Discussion

The results revealed that EFL students invoked some types of reading strategies which were effective and ineffective for their comprehension. The retrospective data indicated that the strategies, starting from the most to the least frequent strategies: *reading sentence by sentence, re-reading, translating, using cohesive devices, paraphrasing, webbing,* and *using a dictionary.*

The first most frequent strategy was *reading sentence by sentence.* As one of the students, *Mai* (pseudo name), said:

(1)   "I read the paragraph sentence by sentence, understand the meaning of each sentence, and then go on reading till the end of the sentence of the paragraph. After that, I look for a main idea of that paragraph." (Mai)

The second most strategy was *re-reading.* One of the students, *Yen*, said:

(2) "I read the whole text more than twice and make inferences by figuring out what the author actually wants to convey the message in the text."(Yen)

The use of these two strategies would obviously be due to the attempts to think deeply the content of the text before making inferences. However, this strategy did not help the students identify the main idea and make an inference.

The third most strategy used by the students was *translating.* In this strategy, the students translated the English text literally (word by word or sentence by sentence) into Indonesian, as seen in the following data:

(3)   "I read the text and translated word by word directly so I understand what I read and identify a main idea of a paragraph." (Yan)

This is the common strategy employed by Asian EFL learners. As Liu and Littlewood, in Meyer (2012, p. 246), contrast Western with Asian students' learning strategies, arguing that Asian students incline "to focus on

individual word meanings and grammar points removed from context," while Western students make use of "contextual clues" for comprehension. On the basis of the retrospection (3), there are two plausible explanations why the students used *literal* translation to understand the text. For one thing, this strategy was used because the students tried to understand the exact meaning of each word and sentence and important facts of the text. For another, the strategy was used to identify the main idea since the text is too difficult, or the topic of the text is unfamiliar to the students. Because of the difficulty and unfamiliarity of the text, they had to read the text slowly while translating it if they had not yet understood it. As a result, these impediments make the students unable to identify the main idea and make an inference accurately.

The fourth frequent strategy invoked by the students was *using cohesive devices* such as, *references, word repetitions, synonyms* and *conjunctions*. One of the students stated,

(4) "In order to find out a main idea, first I identify the references which lead us to find out the topic noun and the topic sentence. From the topic sentence, I can identify what the main idea of the paragraph is. As for supporting ideas, I identify sentences which support the main idea." (Her)

References serve a number of purposes. Firstly, they are used to avoid boring repetitions and can provide enriching information about the antecedent (word being referred to). Secondly, they are usually used to connect meaning units and ideas in texts and to present new information in each subsequent sentence. Another cohesive device was *word repetitions*. Like references, the same words might be also often repeated by the author to construct coherence. The next cohesive devices were *synonyms*. The students felt that recognizing the synonym in the text could help them guess the meaning of words in the text and understand the meaning relation in the text.

The fifth strategy used by the students was *paraphrasing*. This strategy refers to readers rephrasing and reproducing the content of L2 text using words in L1 language. There are some ways of paraphrasing chosen by the students. They reproduced some contents, important facts, or just the main idea (e.g., a claim) and supporting ideas (e.g. evidence).One way of paraphrasing was to reproduce some content of the English text by using words in Indonesian, as stated by one of the students:

(5) "The above text describes the movement of the employees. This causes problems . . . The cause is . . . What is needed is . . . On the basis of these facts, we can draw a conclusion." (Eka)

The sixth strategy used by the students was *webbing*. Through webbing, the students are expected to be able to generate key words and to connect them together into a kind of "network" of information in their mind. Farrel (2009) and Sudo and Takaesu (2013) stated that the semantic webbing or mapping could activate students' background knowledge. However, solely webbing strategy did not help the students comprehend texts. This strategy would be effective when it was combined with other bottom-up strategies: *reading sentence by sentence, re-reading,* and *using cohesive devices,* as seen the following retrospection:

(6) "I find out key words related to business (topic). I read all sentences and translate them into Indonesian. Before comprehending the message, I predict the topic of the paragraph and identify its main idea." (Ren)

The data displayed that the student invoked an *interactive process of reading*. First she tried to guess the topic by relating the key words and the topic of the text. After predicting it, she read sentence by sentence (all sentences) and translated them into Indonesian before identifying the main idea. In this strategy, the student obviously made use of the top-down strategy (predicting the topic) and the bottom-up strategy (reading sentence by sentence and translating). However, webbing plus reading sentence, re-reading, and translating strategies did not facilitate the students in comprehending the text in the present study. This finding differed from some previous findings which claim that webbing could facilitate the subjects comprehend the text easily (James 1987; Sayavendra 1993).Yet, one caution for interpretation of these results must be taken into account as it is very possible that the ineffectiveness of webbing to improve the students' comprehension in this experiment is due to the students' low level of foreign language proficiency, and this is in line with the claims that EFL students with a low level of foreign language proficiency may not use reading strategies such as webbing, as good readers usually do when they are reading (Laufer and Sim 1985). It can therefore be claimed that webbing is not effective for the EFL readers with a low level of foreign language proficiency in the present study. The other retrospection also showed the use of webbing plus using cohesive devices, as interactive process, as follows:

(7) "I use a web. First, I predict key words related to the topic of the text. Next, I identify references word repetitions, the topic noun, and topic sentence. Finally, we can recognize a main idea of the paragraph." (Sri)

The above retrospection suggests that webbing is used only to activate the readers' knowledge related to the topic of the text. Having the relevant topic, they could identify the key words which were considered to be related to the references, the topic nouns, and the topic sentences. When webbing was combined with cohesive devices, it was effective. Accordingly, these results strongly confirmed that the cohesion plus webbing strategy could help the students comprehend the text.

The *least* strategy used was *using a dictionary*. This finding reaffirms earlier study (Hulstijin, Hollander, and Greidanus 1996), suggesting that ESL/EFL students seldom use the dictionary when reading a non-fictional text such as academic texts in order to understand the main idea. As one of the students, *Fen*, stated,

(8) "I try to read the whole text in order to get a main idea. Then if I find out some unknown words or vocabulary I try to guess the meanings of those words from the context. I will look up them in a dictionary if I really do not understand the meanings of them."(Fen)

The data showed that the student realized that looking up new words in a dictionary, while reading, would slow down her reading and interrupts her thinking. As a result, she only guessed the meaning of words from the context. However, there are some serious pitfalls in guessing if students' language proficiency is low. Referring to Hynes' study, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) stated that EFL students could guess the meaning of words accurately only when the context provided them with immediate clues for guessing. If the context clues are not recognized by them because of their low level of foreign language proficiency, they might lead to misinterpret the meaning of words and consequently misunderstand the text. Therefore, students are encouraged to occasionally double-check their guesses by using the dictionary.
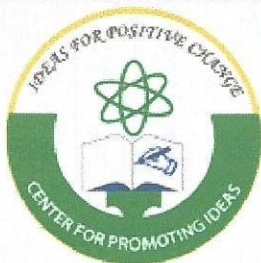
Conclusion

The study showed that Indonesian EFL students used more the bottom-up strategies than the top-down strategies. The types of bottom-up strategies used were *reading sentence by sentence, re-reading, translating, using cohesive devices* and *using a dictionary*, while top-down strategies were *webbing*. Interestingly *webbing plus sentence by sentence* was also invoked by the students though the strategy was ineffective. By contrast, when *webbing* was combined with *cohesion*, this strategy was effective. Thus, these results may suggest that Indonesian EFL students with a low level of English proficiency rely on their linguistics knowledge when they read economics texts. However, they are ready to be trained to develop their reading strategies if they are given the explicit teaching of top-down and bottom-up simultaneously as the result also revealed that they could employ webbing plus sentence by sentence and cohesion.

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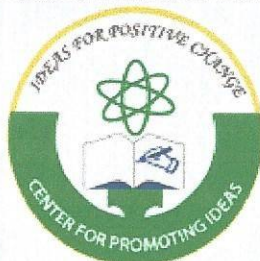**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL LANGUAGE & LINGUISTICS**

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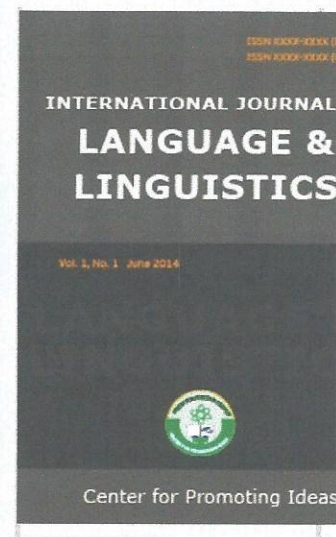
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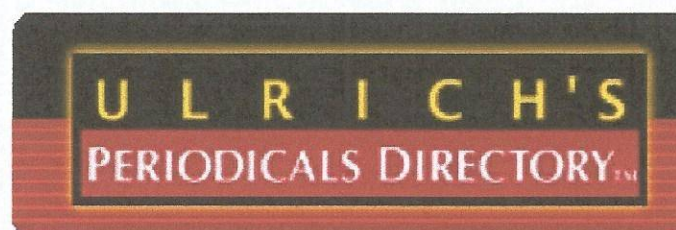
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