

Reflection on Background Knowledge Implementation Using Top-down Activities

Fitri Hidayati

Yogyakarta State University, Indonesia

e-mail: fitrihidayati5@gmail.com

Basikin

Yogyakarta State University, Indonesia

e-mail: basikin@uny.ac.id

Abstract:

This paper attempts to examine students' reaction and potential challenges encountered in the implementation of activities which stimulate their background knowledge. The authors implemented lesson plan which used top-down activities to raise students' awareness of the use of background knowledge. The analysis in this study used two evaluation questions taken from Cook's 'Discourse' book. The result showed that there are several reactions from the students as well as problems arose during the implementation of the activities. The reactions and problems are varied determined by the type of the exercise. Additionally, more explanations and examples are needed to be supplied before and also during the activity in completing the exercises. Those are necessary because during completing the activities, some students appeared to be confused and in need of more explanation and encouragement. Finally, continue practice using these type of exercises might give positive result in improving students' awareness of background knowledge in discourse.

Keywords: *Background knowledge, top-down activities, reading*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main important skills in the learning of English language is reading. It plays a significant role in foreign language teaching. Richards and Renanadya (2002) point out that reading is important in foreign language teaching because it is regarded as one of the most important goals by foreign language students as well as a crucial skill in numerous pedagogical purposes. In addition, it is also as a basic criterion in which to measure one's English level proficiency (Alhaisoni, 2017).

Based on this importance, numerous experts have attempted to conceptualize theory about reading models and thus how reading should be taught. One of reading models, the top-down, has received closer attention in language teaching for the past three decades (Alhaisoni, 2017). Top down approach is also known as top-down processing. Paran (1996) describes top-down processing as a concept-driven model stresses on the contextual factors such as socio-cultural knowledge which starts from whole to part. In other words, top-down processing happens when the reader activates his/her world knowledge to facilitate in comprehending the text. Implementing top-down activities in language classroom is very essential for the language learners to sharpen their sensitivity of background knowledge in discourse.

Background knowledge, or commonly known as schemata, has a very significant part in reading. Schemata supplies language learners with prior knowledge, including explicit and tacit knowledge, metacognitive and conceptual knowledge (Dochy & Alexander, 1995) which would be useful to make sense of the text. In addition, a successful interaction between the reader and the text is needed to achieve reading comprehension (Alfaki & Siddiek, 2013). Accordingly, the use of text is undeniably significant. It provides the learners with comprehensible input of the target language. Bright and McGregor (1970) assert that there will be little language learning when there is little reading. Thus, the role of reading activity in language learning is very important.

A number of studies have been conducted to investigate the implementation of top-down processing in learning different skills, including reading, and their application in EFL classroom. Some studies (Fatemi, Vahedi, & Seyyedrezaie, 2014; Murray, 1980) have explained the significant role of implementing top-down activities in reading comprehension. On the other hand, there is lack of studies that investigate students' reaction and problems which probably take place in the implementation of top down activities. Based on this reason, this research is aimed to investigate students' reaction and potential challenges encountered in the implementation of top-down activities in reading. This implementation of activities using top-down activities is also to raise students' awareness of the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Top-down Approach

Top-down approach, which arose from psycholinguistics (Frehan, 1999), is one of the two types of reading processing. This approach refers to a reading model which

stresses on the use of readers' schemata in the process of reading (Goodman, 1967; Smith, 1982). The readers scan the text for information before comparing it with their knowledge of schemata to help them to make sense of the text. Therefore, the readers will actively interact with the text they are reading in top down processing.

The top down approach is indeed dissimilar from bottom up approach. Goodman (as cited in Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983) claims that every piece of information in the text is not going to be used by the readers as the main difference between the top down and the bottom-up processing. In other words, the readers only pick some sections of text based on the purpose of their reading before using them to surmise the meaning and to check the predicted meanings by relating to the readers' knowledge of schemata (Carrell, 1988b). A number of researchers have claimed that "the concepts which a reader brings to a text are actually more important than the text itself for comprehension" (Mikulecky, 1990, p. 4). Rather than the knowledge of the language of the text, some of those concepts put emphasis on the knowledge about the content of the text that the readers use in the comprehension process.

2.1.1. The Top-down Activities in ELT Classroom

Top-down activities can be implemented in different ways in ELT classroom. Škudienė (2002) observed which model of reading is underlined during pre-, while-, and post-reading activities for intermediate English language learners. The results of this research revealed that top down model mostly are done during pre-reading and while-reading activities.

2.12. Problems with the Top-down Approach Implementation

The top-down approach does not escape some problems. The first problem is that top-down approach completely neglect the decoding skills, which is the main point of bottom-up approach, as it stresses on the significance of "the prediction of meaning by means of context cues or certain kinds of background knowledge (Eskey, 1988, p. 93). Carrell (1988a) supports this view, noting that "there has been a tendency to view the introduction of a strong top-down perspective as a substitute for the bottom-up, decoding view of reading" (p.4). The next problem is that top-down processing requires the reader to be in native-readers level which makes it not appropriate for ESL/EFL readers (Eskey, 1988). He points out that in top-down processing, supposed reader must be a good reader who has already skilled in decoding the language. It clearly gives a challenge to be implemented in a class if the students' skill to decode the language is not yet to be good. The third problem relates to text familiarity and readers' schemata (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). It means that readers understanding of the text relies on the related schema possess by the readers while reading. As a result, readers' lack of appropriate schemata that will assist in understanding the content of the text better will result in confusion and failure.

2.2. Background Knowledge or Schemata

Background knowledge, or commonly known as schemata, is very important in discourse. The schemata theory was proposed by the gestalt psychologist Bartlett

“...who observed how people, when asked to repeat a story from memory, filled in details which did not occur in the original but conformed to their cultural norms” (Cook, 1997). According to Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), schema theory is closely related with process of reading since the readers need to associate their previous experiences with what they reading. It is culture specific because different reader has different background knowledge. Considering the importance of schema in reading, students have to be engaged in learning activities which involve the use of schemata. That is because schemata affects every level of discourse such as the quantity and ordering of information, to cohesion, the use of article, and grammatical structure. In this paper, however, the authors focused on the reflection of the implementation of three activities which are the quantity of information, article choice and information structuring.

2.2.1. Information Quantity and Ordering

Activities which can increase sensitivity of the information quantity and ordering for a particular receiver should be given to the students. One of the type activities which can be used to improve students’ information quantity and ordering sensitivity is information gap activities (Littlewood, as cited in Cook, 1989). Pramesti (2010) describes information gap as an activity where learners need to talk to each other to find the missing information they need to complete a task. Information gap activities encourage the learners to share the information they have in order to gather information, make decisions and solve problems (Neu & Reeser, 1997). Thus, teachers should design activities which involve language learners in situations where one of them has some information and the other does not. That is to say, situations encompassing an information gap between language learners are very advantageous. The next benefit of information gap activities is that in order to complete the task, the learners are forced to negotiate meaning because they have to deliver comprehensible information to others (Neu & Reeser, 1997). Through this information gap activities, the students can develop their information quantity and ordering sensitivity for a specified receiver.

2.2.2. Developing Article Choice in Discourse

The choice of article used in a discourse cannot be regarded of no importance. Cook (1989) asserts that the use of definite or indefinite article is influenced by the degree of shared knowledge or schemata to some extent. Particular uses of definite article can be evidence of schemata. Cook (1989) explains that there are two main explanation on the use of the definite article (the) rather than indefinite article (a/an) in traditional grammars. The first is placed before nouns to refer to something unique. Lyons (1999) stresses that and the concept of uniqueness and association define definiteness, e.g., the author of a book. The second one is placed before nouns and becomes definite as it is being mentioned for the second time.

2.2.3. Information Structure

Re-structuring the information of a discourse is an advantageous activity for students to practice and develop their discourse coherence. Cook (1989) believes that these kind of activities have prospect in improving the coherence of students discourse.

However, Cook (1989) asserts that this can create problems for it is difficult to give details on what is required as well as there are probability of involving the complex forms of English in jumbling sentences. Simple exercises for non-linguistics students which can be implemented to develop their information structuring and coherence are recombination, approximation and transfer. Meanwhile, the alternative way which can be given as an example for the students is through ordering information using simple sentence or paraphrasing.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Design of the study

This study employed descriptive qualitative study. It attempted to report and describe the students' reaction and probable problems which would likely to take place in the implementation of top-down activities as an effort to raise students' awareness of the role of background knowledge in reading. There are total three exercises that the students have to complete in the lesson plan. Each task has different exercise on: 1) the quantity of information necessary for a specified receiver; 2) article choice for a specified receiver; 3) information structure. The implementation was evaluated using evaluation questions from Cook (1989). The evaluation analysis is conducted for each exercises where students' reactions and problems appear during the implementation will be noted.

3.2 The Subject of the Study

A total twenty students of non-English department from one of private universities in Yogyakarta participated in this study. These students are in their fifth semester taking English as general English course. There are 7 females and 13 males students. The level of language proficiency of these students range from basic (upper) to intermediate.

3.3 Lesson Plan

The lesson plan was designed based on the topic which had been set in the syllabus for the students. The topic was about dangerous situation. The authors did not designed the lesson plan based on certain type of lesson plan. Instead, this lesson plan focused only on the implementation of top-down activities which stimulate students' background knowledge.

The authors decided to choose an authentic text from the famous novel titled '*A Thousand Splendid Sun*' by Khaled Hosseini which set during Afghanistan War. The piece of text chosen contained the topic proposed in the syllabus. In addition, the authentic text had to fulfill the criterion of containing definite and indefinite articles as it was needed to be used as one of the activities which stimulate students' background knowledge. The final task of restructuring information, the authors designed activities which required the students to use both of their writing and speaking skills.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In evaluating the implementation of the activities, the authors used two evaluation questions from Cook (1989). The questions are:

- a.) Note down students' reactions and any problems you encounter. In the light of this, make any changes to the exercises which you feel are necessary.
- b.) You probably spent quite a long time in explanation. Do you feel the activities justify this? Try a similar exercise again at a later date, and compare the success of the second time with the first.

4.1. Students' Reactions, Problems Encountered, and Changes Made

4.1.1 Exercise 1 (Information quantity and ordering through information gap activity)

This exercise employs information gap activity. The students were divided into pair work. One student was assigned to tell the other student about a certain information. In this activity, the information was related to Afghanistan war. Discussion took place between one student who was assigned to inform about the topic and the other who did not. The students understood what was expected from them. However, they found this exercise to be more challenging than the typical discussion that they usually have in the classroom. They were confused in the beginning since they were not familiar with the topic of the text, which was about Afghanistan war. Because of that, the students needed more time, especially for those who were assigned to tell the information. As the result, the students required more time to complete the task.

During the information gap activity, changes was made on some part of the task. At first, it was assumed the students already had sufficient background knowledge about the topic presented in the text (Afghanistan war). On the other hand, this assumption was wrong. Subsequently, the task was changed slightly by providing printed information about the topic to the students who had to share the information to their partners.

4.1.2 Exercise 2 (indefinite and indefinite article)

In completing this exercise, students encountered another difficulty. They needed more explanation about the definite and indefinite article's role in knowledge of schemata to understand discourse. When the students faltered during finishing the task, some of them felt discouraged to continue. However, most of the students could complete the exercise and they finally understood the use of indefinite and definite article related to knowledge of schemata. There were not many changes made in this task. Instead, more explanations and examples were given to the students to encourage them.

4.1.3 Exercise 3 (Information structure)

The students' reactions in doing this exercise were varied. A number of students found this exercise very stimulating. They felt challenged to restructure the information in their own way. The rest of the students found the exercise on information structure very difficult. Thus, they felt frustrated in completing the task.

The problem discovered in this task is the background of the students. It is because these students are non-English department students. Therefore, this exercise was felt difficult for most of them.

Seeing how the students struggled to finish the exercise, there were some changes made. In order for the students to be able to complete this exercise, they were asked to do exercise on paraphrasing using one simple sentence. After the students were able to do the paraphrasing, they had to complete the exercise. Thus, the changes were felt necessary to help the students to be able to complete the exercise.

4.2. Amount of Time Spent for Explanation and Comparison of the Success

In implementing these exercises, the authors spent quite sometimes to do the explanation. The explanation was not only given before, but also when the students working on the exercises. This happened because the students faltered from time to time or found difficulties in working on the exercises. Often, additional examples were given in order to aid the students to understand better.

As for the comparison of the success, there are several aspect which needs to be noted. Due to the time limitation and the amount of the exercises, the implementation of those exercises could not be conducted twice to compare the success rate between the first and the second implementations. This is because one lesson plan which contains four exercises needed to be conducted in two meetings. As a result, it needs four meetings in total to implement two lesson plans with the similar exercises. Considering the time restriction, both from the implementers and the students' available time, it is impossible to implement the second lesson plan for comparison. Therefore, the implementation could only be conducted for one lesson plan.

The goal of this top-down activities implementation was to stimulate the use of background knowledge as well as raising students' awareness of their background knowledge. However, taking notes on students' reaction and some potential problems taking place during the implementation were the main points of this study. As it is noted, from the result of the three exercises implementation on information quantity and ordering, article choice, and information structure to raise students' awareness of background knowledge, it could be observed that there are several reactions from the students as well as problems emerging in the process. The reactions and problems are varied determined by the type of the exercise. The first noticeable problem is about the students' background knowledge of the text. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) point out that text familiarity has strong influence on readers' schemata. Accordingly, lack of appropriate schemata to help understanding the content of the text will cause failure or confusion to make sense of the text. The next problem is students' proficiency level has not supported the understanding of the text. Eskey (1988) states that top-down approach is suitable for native-readers level and hence does not appropriate for ESL/EFL readers sometimes. When the proficiency in reading and skill to decode the language are not yet to be good, it will result in confusion and failure. In addition, Cook (1989) states that using activities which involve the complex forms of English in jumbling sentences

will be difficult for non-linguistics students. The participants of the study were from non-English department students. Thus, for these problems to appear is common because the students' language proficiency level range from basic (upper) to intermediate

5. CONCLUSION

Background knowledge is an essential part of language learning, particularly to be used in comprehending discourse. It provides comprehensible target language input for the language learners. By implementing activities which stimulate the use of background knowledge, language learners will be assisted in understanding discourse in particular and learning the target language in general.

An important thing to be noted from the implementation of the three types of exercises is that the students might find these exercises to be confusing and difficult in the beginning. As the consequence, more explanations and examples are needed to be supplied before as well as during the activity of completing the exercises. Those are necessary because during the process, some students seem to be confused and need more encouragement. On the other hand, it is also noted that these exercises are very useful in stimulating the use of background knowledge in reading. With continues practice using these type of exercises, it might give positive result in improving students' awareness of background knowledge in discourse. Last but not the least, teacher should be careful in selecting the authentic text to be used for the activities. Adapting the text to suit with the students' level will also help.

This research, however, does not escape some limitations. First of all, there was time restriction for the implementation of the lesson plan. Secondly, it is the students' background which comes from non-English department (including their language proficiency). Therefore, further implementation and investigation on this topic is essentially needed in the future.

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