

Exploring Challenges and Strategies of Teaching Reading Online in EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

This research sought to shed more light on the reading instruction methods used at SMP 10 November Sidoarjo and SMP Progressif Bumi Sholawat during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study employed the descriptive qualitative method for its research design. The 2 English instructors at SMP 10 November Sidoarjo and SMP Progressif Bumi Sholawat were chosen by the researcher as respondents. The English instructors were interviewed by the researcher using WhatsApp concerning the challenges and strategies they employed in teaching reading online. The results of this study showed that the English teachers encounter challenges such as poor participation in reading class which is caused by their poor understanding of reading texts which is particularly caused by lack of vocabulary mastery, difficulty in controlling students' participation, poor emotional bound and students' boredom. Meanwhile teachers' strategies in their teaching reading online are encouraging students to search for difficult vocabulary online, discussing their problem through WhatsApp, finding resources for better comprehension, finding the main idea in each paragraph. This study further suggests that the teachers encourage students to try to solve reading problems more independently and work collaboratively.

Keywords: *teaching strategies; teaching online reading; teaching challenges*

INTRODUCTION

All nations in the world have been affected by the Covid-19 epidemic, including Indonesia. Millions of people have been affected by this virus, making it necessary for them to conduct all of their social interactions from home or online. In addition, Nadiem Makarim, Indonesia's minister of education and culture, stated that teaching and learning activities must be carried out at home using technology tools in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in Indonesia. Joko Widodo, the president of Indonesia, asked the Indonesian people to cut back on non-essential activities outside (Purwanto, Cahyono, Asbari, & Fahlevi, 2020).

Even in the event of a pandemic, all classes, including English classes, must be taught. Because English is a universal language that people can use to communicate with others wherever in the globe, it is crucial to teach it to children. According to Caplan (2020), English is the most widely spoken language in the world with over 1.13 billion speakers, of which 379 million are native speakers.

The introduction of online teaching and learning is one of the good efforts the Indonesian government has taken to stop the spread of this infection, despite the fact that it has been going on for about two years. It is a form of instruction and learning that takes place virtually through the use of technology, allowing for participation from anywhere and without the need for in-person encounters (Afif, Mistar, & Karimullah, 2021).

However, teaching reading skills online presented a number of challenges for teachers. However, when learning English, one of the crucial abilities that pupils must master is reading. Anggeraini, Episiasi, and Sulisty (2022) claim that reading is a fundamental English skill that must be

learned in a language school and goes beyond mere word-for-word translation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the teacher's preferred method of online reading instruction. A qualified instructor will select the approach that is best for the subject being taught, the level of student proficiency, and the stage of the students' learning journey (Anilkumar, n.d.).

Studies that were conducted in connection with this research include Anggeraini, Episiasi, and Sulisty (2022). The researchers discovered that three strategies—reading aloud in virtual meetings, silent reading, and downloadable digital storytelling—are used by four English teachers to teach reading skills. On the other hand Saputri, Rizal, and Afriani (2021) unveil two reading methods employed the research participants namely scaffolding and QARs or Question-Answer Relationship). Meanwhile, Audina, Zega, Simarmata, Situmeang, and Tarigan (2020) claim that the Directed Reading Activity (DRA) is the reading strategy mostly employed by English teachers in teaching reading online.

All of those earlier studies had a connection to the current study, and they all made use of the same research methodology, which is the descriptive qualitative approach. However, the first and third researchers' research was primarily focused on vocational high schools, whereas the second researchers' research was primarily focused on senior high schools. Meanwhile, the purpose of the current study was to perform a thorough analysis and research on the methods used by English teachers to teach reading classes online, specifically in junior high schools.

The researcher was interested in examining the teaching methods used by teachers in Junior High School's online reading classes, particularly at SMP 10 November Sidoarjo and SMP Progressif Bumi Sholawat. This study differs from previous reviewed studies in terms of age of students. Differences in ages in an online reading class may employ various strategies, the teaching strategies used in junior high and senior high school may change. Teaching younger learners requires different tactics than teaching older students (Ahsanah, 2020).

Moreover, teaching online also poses several challenges both in language productive and receptive skills such as in reading. Those challenges might include the less intense interaction among teachers and students or students and students, students' boredom, poor participation as well as technical problems in online teaching and learning processes.

The researcher's goal is to gather data by discussing the English teacher's instructional strategies in an online reading course. In light of these factors, the researcher chose to study teaching methods and challenges the English teachers encountered in SMP 10 November Sidoarjo and SMP Progressif Bumi Sholawat.

METHODS

The descriptive qualitative method was employed in this study. A qualitative study, according to Thomas & Maglivi (2009), is an analysis of the real world, an exploration of experience, and a look at daily living. While descriptive research is a fact-finding, interpretive scientific study (Krishnarao, 1961). The purpose of a qualitative descriptive study, according to Lambert & Lambert (2012), is to provide a thorough summary of particular events that people or groups of people have encountered. In this study, the researcher attempted to describe the facts regarding the tactics, activities, and issues faced by teachers of online reading classes.

The participant of this study are those who meet the following criteria, (1) an English teacher, (2) having teaching experience minimally 4 years (3) experiencing teaching reading online particularly during Covid-19 pandemic. A qualitative study, according to Thomas & Maglivi (2009), is an analysis of the real world, an exploration of experience, and a look at daily living. While descriptive research is a fact-finding, interpretive scientific study (Krishnarao, 1961). The purpose of a qualitative descriptive

study, according to Lambert & Lambert (2012), is to provide a thorough summary of particular events that people or groups of people have encountered.

Hence, in this study, the researcher attempted to describe the facts regarding the challenges and strategies encountered and employed by Santi (pseudonym), the English teachers at SMP 10 November Sidoarjo and Rita (pseudonym), the English teacher of SMP Progressif Bumi Sholawat. The researcher assumed that based on the criteria set by researcher, the participants are competent English teachers including in online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In order to get the result of the research, the researcher conducted interviews. In the interview, the researcher used a semi-structured interview which means that the questions are based on an interview guide but the topic of the interview can be developed based on issues raised in this study namely on challenges and strategies employed by the English teachers in teaching reading online during Covid-19 pandemic at SMP 10 November Sidoarjo and SMP Progressif Bumi Sholawat.

The researcher analyses the data obtained from interviews in the following procedures. Upon completion of collecting data, the researcher tried to get familiarized with the data then the interview data were translated, organized, and familiarized by the researcher by narrating the material. The data were then integrated by the researcher to complete each other. The information was evaluated and categorized. The data were then coded and reduced after being integrated based on the issues. To make the data easier to show and analyze, the researcher removed irrelevant information and came to conclusions. The researcher will find it simple to understand and display the findings after all the data have been processed using the previous procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' Challenges and Strategies in Online Reading Class

The researcher found several challenges in teaching reading online. The data obtained from Rita reveal that the students' participation in online reading class is poor particularly those with low English competence. This is caused by their poor understanding of texts which is primarily affected by their low vocabulary mastery. In the interview Rita expressed the challenges she encountered in teaching reading online as follows:

"Students in medium or mediocre and low competence are less active in participating in reading class as seen in their responses to assignments uploaded in WhatsApp group but those in high competence particularly actively responded the assignments in WhatsApp group"

Furthermore she added:

"Their poor participation in WhatsApp group is particularly due to their poor text comprehension and they are shy to ask through WhatsApp group"

Based on the interview with her, she proposed several as stated below:

"To deal with those problems I asked them to find their difficult words online such as through Google Translate or online dictionary. In addition, I encourage them not to read every single sentence; rather, I asked them to find the main idea in each paragraph. The last strategy is that I asked them to make WhatsApp group with varied language competences, allowing the the smarter students can help the poorer students"

Santi, another research participant also encounters challenges in teaching reading online as expressed as follows:

“Teaching reading online made me unable to control students’ seriousness in attending the class. Also, less interaction made us have poor psychological bound. Boredom is another issue in this type of class reflecting that they are not motivated in learning which is also caused by the bad internet connection”

To overcome such arising problems in teaching reading online, she proposed several strategies, namely:

“I performed strategies to deal with such situations such as finding the difficult words independently such as through google translate, encouraged them to discuss their reading problems through WhatsApp group, finding sources for solution in YouTube or Google or discussion in the class online”

To conclude, the English teachers share quite similar problems when teaching reading class online and they also performed similar strategies in dealing with such situations by stressing on autonomous learning, collaborative activities and vocabulary familiarizing.

The data of this study reveal that technologies used in online teaching is not problem free. They posed large array of problems such as difficulty to check or assess students’ reading comprehension (Muflahah & Sukirno, 2021). Their study unveils that teaching reading online poses several challenges such as difficulty to observe students’ responses and to control their activeness in reading class participation. These findings are congruent with the findings of this study.

Faced with such challenges, the research participants performed strategies to enhance students’ reading comprehension in online reading classes. Those strategies include engaging students in finding other resources to enhance and ‘validate’ their comprehension. This engagement is crucial in reading particularly because one text might not provide self-sufficient explanation of a concept; hence further exploration through comparing and even contrasting with other texts is crucial. The comparison to other texts may give the readers further elaboration of the concept they seek to comprehend. This inter-textual reading would help them understand the concept deeper which will be then stored in their memory serving as background knowledge that may be recalled later when reading similar texts. This is important since comprehension involves processing information presented in a text integrated with readers’ background knowledge (Deshpande, 2016; Weng, 2012). Thus, a text by itself does not carry its own meaning but readers should actively engage in reading to construct the meaning of the texts (Brown, 2001)

The other strategy the research participants perform is encouraging students to actively discuss with others particularly with the more competent through WhatsApp group. Such social engagement offers descent benefits for text comprehension and has been empirically investigated (e.g. Nystrand, 2006; Alexander, 2009). The benefits of discussion in relation to reading comprehension is that in discussion, participants might propose several points of views on the topic, allowing others to broaden their knowledge on the topic which is then incorporated into what they know with information in the text to construct the meaning (Brown, 2001; Grabe, 1991, 2009; Deshpande, 2016).

Another benefit is that the talk in discussion promotes greater readers’ engagement in constructing or making sense of the text. McKeown, Beck, & Blake (2009) assert that the talk in discussion enables readers to make inferences as well as reflect on the meaning of the text. Good readers continuously reflect on their comprehension through comprehension monitoring throughout reading processes (Hudson, 2007; Grabe, 2009). The arising ideas or points of view on the discussed topic may enrich the participants’ view on that issue, enabling them to comprehend the topic discussed deeper.

Moreover, the discussion involving the participants who very possibly have different knowledge and proficiency levels help them reach Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD (Lantolf, 2001), the level of new competence as a result of collaborative work. In other word, discussing the topic with others may enhance their comprehension which is particularly because the participants who are more competent may scaffold the lower levels. In addition the collaboration among peers allow them to negotiate the meaning more actively since the power relation in such interaction is more linear and is considered ideal for learning to take place (Pica, 1987)

Apart from the possibility of reaching ZPD, the scaffolding from the more knowledgeable peers may lead to self-confidence development and this development potentially lead to improved self-efficacy in dealing with reading problems. The reading self efficacy subsequently results in stronger persistence to continue reading rather than to stop and change to another topic. Such positive behavior resulting from the development of self efficacy may affect their comprehension. Several studies have documented the positive correlation between self-efficacy and reading comprehension (Pajares, 2006; Klassen & Usher, 2010). This suggests that the higher the readers' self-efficacy in reading is, the better their reading comprehension might be.

Aside from textual and social engagement, the high achievers were also socio-culturally engaged through using cultural artefact such as Youtube, online dictionary etc. Drawing on Vygotskian school of thought, human cognition development is facilitated through interaction either with human or cultural artefact (e.g. Dzulfikri, 2016; Lantolf, 2001). By interacting with cultural artefact such as Youtube to solve reading problems, readers may develop their abilities in comprehending the texts.

The engagement both textually and socio-culturally reflects that they are active readers. The high achievers actively employ myriad reading strategies in comprehension processes, facilitating them to understand the text as reading strategies operate to lessen demand on working memory by facilitating comprehension processing (Hudson, 2007). Thus reading strategies are not only the conscious actions to solve comprehension problems encountered in reading but also any attempts to facilitate comprehension.

The other strategy that both teachers performed is asking their students to find the difficult words online such as through google translate or online dictionary. Encouraging them to interact with cultural artefact such as online dictionary is helpful for their cognitive development. Socio cultural theory posits that human cognition development is mediated by cultural artefact (Lantolf, 2001). Several studies highlight the importance of interaction between learners and cultural artefact for cognitive development including in linguistic domain (e.g. Lantolf, 2001; Dzulfikri, 2016). Furthermore using dictionary when encountering difficult words which is not either cognitively or linguistically demanding can be easily performed by readers of all proficiency levels.

Moreover, although using dictionary is popular and identical to the strategy of the low achievers while high achieving students tend to employ global reading strategies in dealing with meaning difficulty such as guessing meaning of the unknown words from the context (e.g. Block, 1992), this notion is not always true. In fact high achievers in this study also very commonly used dictionary, which is categorized into Support Strategy, when encountering difficult words. Grabe (2009) claims that the use of strategy is not only dependent upon the reading proficiency levels, but also the levels of text difficulty. He further contends that when the proficient readers read a frustrating level text and struggle for it, they might scrutinize the individual words and the use of dictionary is unavoidable. Meanwhile the low achievers in particular and medium achievers who are below or at a threshold level competence may also tend to employ technical support rather than textual clues (see. Hudson, 2007) such as using dictionary rather than guessing the meaning of unknown words since their vocabulary

mastery especially the low achievers might not be sufficient to guess the words from text (e.g. Grabe, 1991)

To sum up, teachers should be adaptive to any technological changes when teaching their students. The ability to adapt to the ever-changing environment can be viewed from the strategies they employ when teaching online. Hence, a good teacher is that who can work in any situations effectively.

CONCLUSION

Technological development not only brings positive effects in academic life such as the use of Zoom which facilitates distant learning, YouTube which is resourceful for language learning, but technology also poses challenges and create problems such as misuse of this technology which makes teachers unable to control students well. Physical interaction between students and students as well as students and teachers is also restricted, creating poor psychological bound among them which is crucial in language learning.

To respond to the negative effects of the teaching technologies, the teachers should be creative in teaching particularly by employing strategies to enhance students' performance. Furthermore students also should be cooperative and collaborative in learning when using such technologies to enhance their achievement.

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