



READING IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A CASE OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS OF JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SOUTH SULAWESI, INDONESIA

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Abstract

Beginning learners of English as a foreign language assume to deal with alphabetical knowledge, vocabulary knowledge and fluency in order to be able to read in English. This is known as linear model of reading, familiarly called the bottom-up model, views reading as a part-to-whole process. First, the reader learns to recognize letters, followed by words and words in context, until the student finally begins to understand what's read. This research aimed to assess the reading ability of the beginning learners of English, i.e. first year students of junior secondary school. An adapted early grade reading assessment instrument was administered to 431 students in three districts in South Sulawesi province. Findings indicate that the mean correct letters spelled per minute, the mean correct familiar words read per minute, and mean correct words in connected text read per minute are all at the 'frustration level'. The mean correct answers to comprehension questions for oral reading are also at 'frustration level'. This indicates that the first year English instruction is not effective at all. Therefore, it is very important to design and develop more effective teaching and learning strategy to build strong foundation in the beginning of the students' learning of English.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Beginning Learner of EFL, Early Reading

1. Introduction and Purpose

Reading is one of the key factors leading to the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Ability to read becomes a prerequisite for successful learning in such school subjects as mathematics, science, physics and social sciences. It is very unlikely that a student will be able to proceed to higher education without sufficient level of reading ability. Thus, success in reading at early stage of schooling is the key to success in further levels of schooling. On the contrary, students who have poor competence in reading will fall behind in most other school subjects. This may make them drop out of schools without adequate skills they need to compete in the workplace. Evidence continues to mount that early success in reading is the key to long-term success in school and in lifelong learning, and that early intervention when reading problems arise is essential if long-term problems are to be avoided (Crevola & Hill, 2001).

Reading is a quite complex process; therefore, it is not surprising that many learners of English struggle very hard to become proficient readers. They could hardly understand the text and they do not read accurately and fluently when they read text aloud. If, in the early introduction of English as a foreign language, in the stage of 'learning to read', the students encounter a lot of difficulties in reading comprehension, they will presumably have problems and disadvantage in

the next stage—reading to learn. Hence, difficulty in reading at the early stage may become a significant barrier for better education of the students.

English, as foreign language, is introduced at the first year of junior secondary school (SMP). The development of student's skills in reading starts at this stage. Despite of this early English instruction, the students' learning is not satisfactory yet. Some studies have indicated such learning outcome. For example, Sadtono et al. (1997) reported the results of their English diagnostic survey in four provinces—Central Kalimantan, East Java, South Sulawesi, and South Sumatera that the English learning achievement of SMP students is very low. The average percentage of the test result in listening is only 32%, in speaking 26%, in reading 31% and in writing 20%. It is assumed that if these students continue to senior secondary schools, they are likely to continue having poor English achievement. Rahman and Mustamir (2003) reported that the students of senior secondary schools had poor mastery of vocabulary which might have made them unable to comprehend the text that they read. These second grade students of SMA reading comprehension ability was at 'frustrating level' (Miller, 1978; Leslie & Caldwell, 2011).

The poor English learning achievement, particularly in reading, at junior secondary schools has negative impact on learning achievement at senior secondary school levels which will in turn influence the learning achievement when the students continue their study to colleges. Rahman and Rasyid (2001) conducted a study on entry level proficiency of the newly admitted students at the English Education Department, Universitas Negeri Makassar. The assessment was based on senior secondary school English curriculum. They reported that the mastery level of English of the senior secondary school graduates was only 45.31%. This achievement level is also categorized 'frustrating level' (Miller, 1978; Leslie & Caldwell, 2011). There seems to be a chain-effect, when the basis is weak—the learning outcome at the lower school level is poor, this learning outcome at the higher school levels tends to be low as well. This challenging condition demands the English teachers at junior secondary school to change their classroom practices in order to be more effective. It is important, however, that current, up-to-date information about the students' level of English achievement, especially after one year teaching and learning process be examined. The present study aims at investigating the students' reading ability which follows the bottom-up reading model. This traditional view of reading assumes that a fluent or independent reader has acquired adequate skills in phonemic awareness, word recognition, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. The result of this study may show the real needs of the students and teachers, and can be used to design and develop English instruction model at SMP level.

In line with the traditional view of reading, Gough and Tunmer (1986) shows that there are core skills which support process of comprehending text being read. They are the ability to recognize and pronounce words (decoding skill) than the ability to understand oral language (listening skills). Kintsch and Rawson (2005) propose the construction-integration model. This model shows that the process of understanding the text read proceeds in three phases. First, the linguistic stage, the readers recognize and process the words and their meaning. Second, the microstructure stage, the readers recognize and process the meaning word combination in the form of phrases and sentences. Finally, the macrostructure stage, the readers recognize and process the information based on the theme, topic, and text genre. For the purpose of this study, the two models are put together into four main components, namely phonemic awareness (the ability to recognize and manipulate the sound structure of a word), word (knowledge of meaning of words in isolation and in context), fluency (ability to read text accurately and with appropriate speed and intonation, and comprehension (the ability to understand the message as intended by the author/writer). These four components of reading comprehension are to be assessed to find out the felt needs of the English (reading) instruction at junior secondary school level.

2. Methodology

This survey was carried out in three districts in South Sulawesi Province, i.e. Makassar, Parepare, and Takalar. The number of sample was 439 first year students of junior secondary schools (SMP) consisting of 211 males and 228 females (the sample distribution can be seen in Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of Sample in Three Districts

District	Number of schools	Male		Female		Total
		F	%	F	%	
Makassar	8	106	45.69	126	54.31	232
Parepare	6	72	48.65	76	51.35	148
Takalar	3	33	55.93	26	44.07	59
Total	17	211	48.06	228	51.94	439

A reading test, modified Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) (RTI International, 2015) was administered individually to the sample students. The test was intended to assess ability to read or spell letters, to read isolated or decontextualized words, to comprehend text and to write a dictated sentence. This test measured accuracy, fluency and comprehension. Eight senior students were selected as enumerators. They were trained for two days on how to use the instrument including the use of stop watch to time certain part of the test. It took 15 to 20 minutes for the enumerator to administer the test to each individual student.

The data were subjected to descriptive analysis examining the students' accuracy, fluency, and comprehension in reading. The result of the analysis is used to show the general reading comprehension profile of the first year students of SMP, which comprises the phonemic awareness, word recognition, reading fluency and reading comprehension.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Phonemic Awareness

In this assessment section, the students were asked to read (spell in English) random letters or alphabets. There were ten lines containing ten letters each. The enumerator started the time when the student read the first letter and marked the incorrectly spelled letters with a slash. If the student finished reading the ten lines under 60 seconds, the enumerator stopped the watch and wrote down remaining seconds. Meanwhile, the enumerator asked the student to stop reading if the time reached 60 seconds and marked the last letter read by the student. By this way, the data collected could be computed for reading accuracy and fluency of the students. The result of the data analysis of this section can be seen in Table 2. The table shows that the average number of letter students can read per minute (fluency) is 59.59. Of this number, only around 23.68 (39.53%) of the letters are spelled correctly (accuracy). In short, these figures indicate that the letter reading fluency and accuracy are still far below the desired instructional goal.

Table 2: Accuracy and Fluency of Letter/Alphabet Reading

Districts	AverSpHM*)	Aver#CSpHM*)	%CSpHM*)
Makassar	59.83	27.45	45.89
Parepare	59.87	23.43	39.14
Takalar	60.00	20.15	33.59
Total	59.90	23.68	39.54

- *)AverSpHM = Average number of letters read or spelled per minute
- Aver#CSpHM = Average number of letters correctly spelled per minute
- %CSpHM = Average percentage of letters correctly spelled per minute

3.2 Isolated Word Reading

In this assessment section, the student was asked to read individual, decontextualized words. There were ten lines containing five words in each line. Similar to alphabet/letter reading, the enumerator started the time when the student read the first word and marked the incorrectly pronounced words with a slash. If the student finished reading the ten lines under 60 seconds, the enumerator stopped the watch and wrote down the remaining seconds. Meanwhile, the enumerator asked the student to stop reading if the time reached 60 seconds and marked the last word read by the student. The result of the data analysis which shows the accuracy and fluency of word reading can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Accuracy and Fluency of Individual Word Reading

Districts	Aver#WRdM*)	Aver.CWdM*)	Aver%CWdM*)
Makassar	66.10	30.61	44.48
Parepare	64.37	23.17	33.77
Takalar	54.40	16.54	29.05
Total	61.62	23.44	35.77

- *)Aver#WRdM = Average number of words read per minute
- Aver.CWdM = Average number of words correctly read per minute
- Aver%CWdM = Average percentage of words correctly read per minute

Table 3 shows that the students are able to read an average of 61.62 words per minute. Yet, the average number of words that are correctly pronounced is only about 23.44 (37.77%) words. It is assumed that the students will pronounce the words that they already understand the meaning. The average number of words readily understood is far below the figure that they should master if they are expected to comprehend the text they read.

3.3 Text Reading

In this section of the test, the student was asked to read a narrative text consisting of 60 words. The reading was timed. The enumerator marked the mispronounced words and stopped the watch when the students finished reading the text before 60 seconds passed and noted down the remaining seconds. Then, the enumerator put away (or flipped over) the reading passage and started to ask questions, four literal questions and 2 inferential questions. This part assesses the accuracy, fluency, and comprehension of the students. The result of the data analysis can be seen Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: Accuracy and Fluency of Reading Words in Context

Districts	Aver#RdgM*)	Aver.CRdgTM*)	Aver%CRdgTM*)
Makassar	96.42	64.65	65.32
Parepare	97.53	57.80	57.74
Takalar	93.45	54.46	55.67
Total	95.80	58.97	59.58

- *) Aver#RdgM = Average number of words read per minute

Aver.CRdgTM = Average number of words correctly read per minute
 Aver%CRdgTM = Average percentage of words correctly read per minute

Table 4 shows that the average number of words in context that the students can read (fluency) is 95.80 per minute; Of this number, only about 58.97 (59.58%) are correctly pronounced(accuracy); the figure is quite greater than the percentage of correct pronunciations of words in isolation (35.77%).

The students' comprehension about the text that they have read is very poor. The result of the data analysis shows that only 4.29% the comprehension questions are correctly answered by the students. Most of the questions (69.39%) are not responded at all by the students and about 26.29% of the questions are answered incorrectly (see Table 5).

Table 5: Average Percentage of Comprehension Questions Answered

Districts	AverRCC*)	AverRCInc*)	AverRCNR*)
Makassar	6.32	20.98	72.70
Parepare	4.28	21.73	73.87
Takalar	2.26	36.16	61.58
Total	4.29	26.29	69.39

*) AverRCC = Average percentage of correct answers
 AverRCInc = Average percentage of incorrect answers
 AverRCNR = Average percentage of no responses

3.4 Comprehension of Text Read to the Students

In this test section, the enumerator read to the student a short narrative text consisting of 50 words. Then, the student answered four literal questions and an inferential question. The result of the data analysis shows that only an average of 2.48% of the questions are correctly answered, while around 86.06% of the questions do not get any responses from the students (see Table 6).

Table 6: Average Percentage of Questions Answered by the Students

Districts	AverLstC*)	AverLstInc*)	AverLstNR*)
Makassar	3.19	8.45	88.36
Parepare	3.24	11.89	85.41
Takalar	1.02	14.58	84.41
Total	2.48	11.64	86.06

*) AverLstC = Average percentage of correct answers to questions about the story read to the students
 AverLstInc = Average percentage of incorrect answers to questions about the story read to the students
 AverLstNR = Average percentage of no response to questions about the story read to the students

4. Dictation

The last section of the test was dictation. The enumerator read a simple sentence containing 10 words to the students. The sentences was read three times and the students wrote down the sentence. The data were analyzed based on the correct words that the students wrote. The data analysis shows that only about 46.56% of the words dictated to the students. It seems very hard for the student to encode the sounds they hear into symbols of letters and words. Many of the students find it difficult to understand the word meaning in context and wrote words which sound very close to dictated words. For examples 'soap' for 'shop', 'by' for 'buy'. If the students understand the meaning of the words in context, they will certainly be able to identify and write the words '... to buy some rice ...', in place of '... to by some rise ...'.

The findings of the present study are similar to the findings of the English diagnostic survey by Sadtono et al. (1997) in four provinces in Indonesia that the SMP students' ability to read is about 31%. Reading ability is basically supported by a set of language elements: phonemes, words, words in context, and sentences. The findings of the present study indicate that the students can hardly comprehend the text that they read or the text read to them. This can be predicted by the poor ability to accurately and fluently spell letters and words. There seems a correlation between the ability to spell, pronounce, and read words either in isolation or in context and the ability to comprehend the information in the text. These findings could also be an indication of ineffective English instruction at school. The students have been learning the language for one year, yet their achievement is very unsatisfactory which will become the basic foundation for their further learning of the language.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe the reading ability of the first year students of junior secondary schools in South Sulawesi, Indonesia based on the traditional view of reading or commonly called bottom-up model of reading. Beginning learners of English acquire a set of hierarchically ordered sub-skills related to the language features that sequentially build toward comprehension ability. These language features include sounds or phonemes, words, and words in context. This study reveals that the students have very poor mastery of each of the language features. They are not able yet to spell letters accurately with very low rate of reading fluency. Similarly, they read and pronounce words either in isolation or in context with poor accuracy. Their poor skills in these language features may have led them to poor ability to comprehend the text they read. Their reading comprehension is in the category of frustrating level (Miller, 1978; Leslie & Caldwell, 2011), i.e. under forty per cent of correct answers to comprehension questions. This implies that more effective English instruction should be designed and developed during the early introduction of English to the students.

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