

# TEACHING ENGLISH TO UNILA NON-ENGLISH POSTGRADUATE PROGRAM: OBSERVATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By:

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## Background of the Study

Postgraduate students are expected to be able to understand printed texts in English. This is in line with their tasks and assignments they have to do during the course. However, like what was found in the previous reserach (Alisyahbana, 1990; Suparman, 2000; 2006a, 2006b; 2009; 2010), majority of them could not make sense of the ideas conveyed in the text either those explicitly stated or inexplicitly stated. This problem might be due to some factors such as their educational backgrounds, learning habits, previous teaching and learning strategies, attitude, motivation, materials, and teachers.

This research is intended to get a picture of what the participants in one of Lampung University non-English Postgraduate programs encountered while they were making sense of the ideas of the stated and especially the unstated information; how they tried to overcome the problems they encountered; and how to enhance their understanding of the ideas.

## Theory of Comprehension

Smith (1978) discusses *visual* and *nonvisual information* in reading comprehension. He explains that the more nonvisual information you have behind the eyeballs, the less visual information from the page that your brain has to deal with. He emphasizes that it is the nonvisual information, (what you know already about how letters occur in words), that reduces alternatives for you in advance.

Smith (1978) has shown that exceeding concern with the 'visual information' that lies in the surface structure of print can result only in interference with reading. The fluent readers in all aspects of reading are those who pay attention only to that information in the print that is most relevant to their purposes. It is really true that information is extracted from print when someone reads - but very selectively. Smith (1978) emphasizes that the basic skill of reading lies more in the *no visual information* that readers supply from inside their heads rather than in the *visual information* that bombards us from the print.

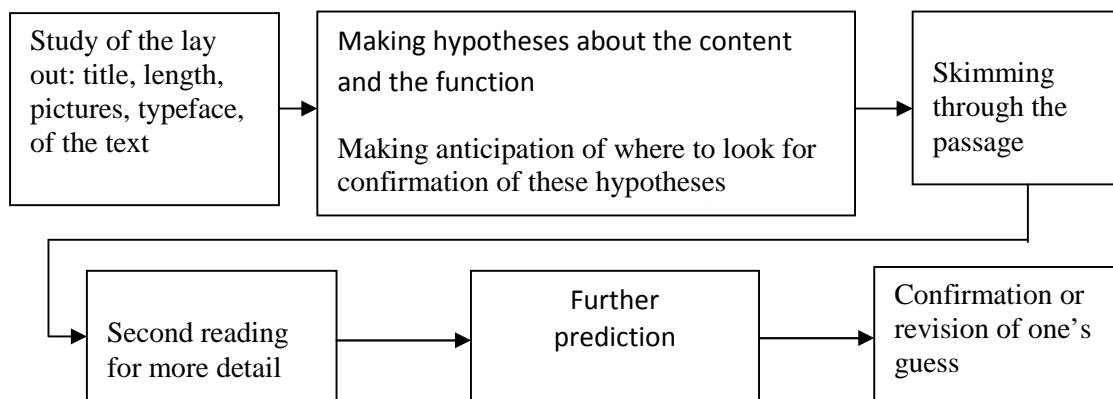
People may *think* that they see words which they read. However, this is a misconception for three reasons: (a) This is a case where the reader cannot trust their own sense. The only circumstance of wondering whether readers identify words when they read will ensure that they are in fact aware of recognizing words as they read. (b) Smith (1978) states that it is impossible to observe oneself reading to see if we are aware of words without being aware of words. Just as people may think they *subvocalize* (read silently to themselves) every time they read because whenever they listen for this inner voice they subvocalize. (c) It would be impossible for anyone to read normally (i.e., to make sense of the print) and at the same time attend to the individual words. And if readers became aware of words, at least one or both of the following things occurred to them: (a) They slowed down tremendously in order to read one-word- at-a-time, and (b) for a while, they lost tract of meaning. It doesn't mean that readers cannot recognize individual words when they read; clearly they can. But the recognition of individual words is not necessary for comprehension, and by contrast comprehension is frequently

necessary if readers want to identify words. Another author considers *reading* as “a construct process of guessing”, (Grellet, 1985: 7); reading is “an active process of deriving meaning” (Goodman, 1976, Smith, 1978) and what one brings to the text is often more important than what one finds in it.

Besides, Grellet (1985) recommends some assumptions that should be kept in mind when teaching and using reading comprehension exercises:

1. Until very recently materials have concentrated on the sentences and units smaller than the sentence. This is because it was assumed that a text was a succession of separate sentences thematically related and consequently it is important only to deal with the structure and meaning of the sentences. Grellet (1985) further argues that if reading is to be efficient, the participants should be trained to understand the structure of longer units such as the paragraph or the whole text. It is not good if a text is studied as though it were a series of independent sentences. This only results in making the participants (a) dependent on understanding every single sentence in a text, even when this is not necessary to meet their reading objective, which causes them to tend to read all texts at the same speed; and (b) reluctant to infer the meaning of sentences or paragraphs from what comes before or after.
2. As a logical consequence of (1) above, the participants should be trained to start with global understanding and move toward detailed understanding rather than working the other way round. The tasks given to start with should be of more global in nature – but within the participants’ competence. Gradually, as they read more fluently and comprehend the idea of a text more easily, a deeper and more detailed understanding of the text can be worked toward. It is, therefore, preferable when designing reading comprehension exercises to start with the overall meaning of the text, its rhetorical function and aim, rather than working on vocabulary or more specific details.
3. Reading comprehension should not be separated from the other skills. It is necessary to link the different skills through the reading activities selected, such as:
  - (a) Reading and writing, for instance, summarizing, mentioning what you have read in a letter, note-taking;
  - (b) Reading and listening, for instance, comparing an article with a news bulletin, using recorded information to solve a written problem, matching opinion and text.
  - (c) Reading and speaking, for instance, discussion, debates, and appreciation.
4. Reading is an active skill. It consistently involves guessing, predicting, checking, and asking oneself questions. According to Grellet, this should be taken into consideration when designing reading comprehension exercises. For example, it is possible to enhance students’ capability of inference through systematic practice, or introducing questions which encourage students to anticipate the content of a text from its title and illustrations or the end of the story from the preceding paragraphs. A second aspect of reading as an active process, according to Grellet, is its communicative function. Reading comprehension materials and exercises must be meaningful and correspond to what one is expected to do with a text.

Consequently, from the very beginning, the students should be taught to use what they know to understand unknown elements, whether these are ideas or simple words. This is best achieved through a “global approach” (Grellet, 1981: 7) to the text. Grellet (1981: 7) summarizes this kind of **global approach** in the following way:



This approach can be elaborated as follows: *Studying the lay out* including title, length, pictures, typeface, of the text may help the participants anticipate what they are likely to find inside the text. This belongs to pre-reading activities. Making hypotheses and making anticipation of where to look for confirmation of their hypotheses will make them more guided and directed toward the anticipation of what they should find in the text. *Skimming through the passage* is to check what they have anticipated before reading. By doing this step, the readers read a text with a special intention or purpose. And thus this makes them more successful, effective and efficient readers. *Second reading for more detail* is to make the readers aware of the details especially contextual clues which are highly important for making inferences and understating the stated and unstated information conveyed in the text. *Further prediction* is to direct the readers to anticipate information that they might encounter in the text, which is very useful for comprehending further information in the text. Finally, *confirmation or revision of one's guess* is to confirm if the prediction is accurate or to revise the previous prediction if it is not appropriate, not suitable with the information in the text. These are the cycles of reading comprehension that a successful, Efficient, and effective readers do.

## Methodology

The participants of the study are all the newly registered non-English postgraduate program students, that is, the students of Masters Degree in Educational Technology, comprising 62 students. The course in this program is not so prestigious because it is a non-credited course that some of the participants were reluctant to take part in it. This was a special challenge for the lecturer to present the material in such a way that all the participants were motivated to take it seriously regardless of non-credited status. They took it for 6 meetings in one of matriculation classes. The data of this study were collected by means of English test, which include reading comprehension and structure and written expressions tests. Before the course started, the participants took part in a pretest intended to identify their entry points prior to the presentation of English.

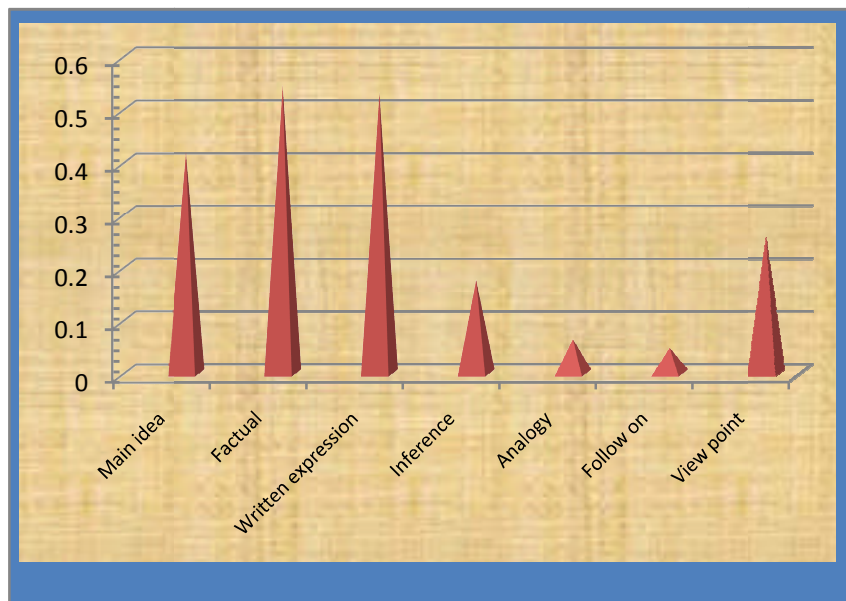
The study is qualitative by nature. Therefore, it was without hypothesis because the objectives are not to test a hypothesis but to explore what the postgraduate students encountered when they were trying to make sense of the idea conveyed in a text.

## Findings and Discussion

Based on the results of the data analysis and discussion, it was found that majority of the students were not able to comprehend the ideas in the English texts. Their difficulties were triggered by their reading habits and low motivation to read; their previous learning background; the strategies of teaching English their teachers used while they were in junior and senior high schools; the strategies of learning they used while they were asked to read English texts; the materials used by the teachers while they were in junior and high schools.

Concerning reading skills tested, the following figure shows that the participants have acquired some skills moderately but some other skills need improving and hard efforts.

**Figure 1. Reading Skills the Participants Acquired**



In relation to making sense of the main idea, 26 participants (41.93%) were able to get the main idea successfully, but majority of them were not successful yet, even though they tried hard, the results were still unsatisfactory. This might due to their lack of reading practice and exposure to English texts. The second reading skill, making sense of the idea based on factual information, there were 33 participants (54.56%) were successful to answer correctly. This represents the highest reading skill that could be acquired. Their high performance might have to do with the participants' efforts to get the idea based on what stated on the texts which might be easier for them to understand than the unstated information. One of the examples of Factual Information Question is as follows:

According to the passage, before language was developed, humans communicated by doing which of the following?

- A. Smoking
- B. Touching
- C. Dancing
- D. Grunting

The figure also shows that the participants' ability in comprehending the idea based on written expression, like their ability to understand the idea based on factual information, is relatively high, i.e., 33 participants (53.22 %). This represents the second highest reading skill that the participants could answer correctly. This sort of questions could be

answered relatively correctly because the answers could be found directly from the text. An example of questions on written expressions is as follows:

- The word *pictographics* in line 5 refers to which of the following?
- A. Wall etchings
  - B. Cave walls
  - C. Temple remains
  - D. *Homo sapiens*

Here the participants were expected to identify the contextual meaning of a certain word based on written expressions in the text.

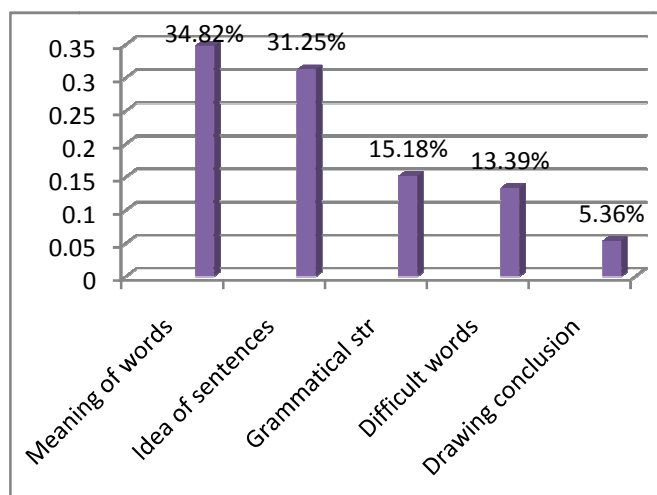
Unlike the first three kinds of reading skills above, the following four kinds of reading skills were less acquired by majority of the participants, that is, Inference, Analogy, Follow on, and View Point. Making Inference based on contextual clues was found to be highly difficult for the postgraduate students. There were only 11 out of 62 participants (17.74%) who could answer the questions correctly. This suggests that the postgraduate students should be trained on how to make sense of the unstated information based on contextual clues. The following is an example of an Inference question:

- The passage supports which of the following conclusions?
- A. Parents play a critical role in their children education.
  - B. Television viewing should be banned during the school year.
  - C. The benefits of communal TV watching can be comparable to communal reading.
  - D. The literacy crisis will be worsen in the near future.

The answer to such question was not stated in the text, the students were expected to identify the answer based on contextual clues. Such question is relatively harder for the participants to answer.

Unlike Figure 1 which shows competences acquired by the participants, the following Figure 2 shows the problems they reported encountered while they were trying to make sense of the ideas in the texts.

**Figure 2. Reading problems the participants encountered**



Concerning with the participants' problems they reported that they encountered while they were trying to make sense of the ideas conveyed in the texts, there were five categories of problems as shown in Figure 2 above with the following elaboration. First,

*understanding meaning of words* in a text. This sort of problem comprises the biggest proportion, i.e., 34.82%. This problem suggests that the way they approached to the text was not globally as they should have done, but discretely instead. They tried to understand the meaning of each word rather than the idea of the whole text. That is why they frequently missed the point. The second problem was *understanding ideas conveyed in each sentence*. Like the first problem, this problem results in difficulty in global understanding of the idea of the whole text. It means that the participants focused their attentions on understanding the idea conveyed in each sentence neglecting the great and most important idea of the whole text. Consequently, they tend to get big problem in understanding the main idea of the whole text. This was due to the fact that they were not aware that each sentence in one paragraph in an English text supports the main idea stated in the beginning of a paragraph. This lack of the ability to get the major point of the idea because of too much Attention focused on understanding the idea conveyed in each sentence makes the participants in Masters in Educational Technology (S2) program low-reading-comprehension achievers. The third problem that they encountered was *lack of grammatical understanding*. The problem also shows that when the participants were trying to make sense of the ideas, they tried to make use of grammatical understanding or 'language analysis' (Suparman, 2000). It means that they assumed, if their grammatical understanding was high enough, they believed they would be able to overcome problems. It might true, because Suparman (2000) found that many of the successful readers were good at language analysis and they to some extent depend on their understanding of the ideas on language analysis.

The next problem they reported was that they found *many difficult and new words*. When they were asked further why they found the words difficult, they replied that they lack of reading especially in English texts. Reading was not their habit. Even they do not like reading. When this problem and the problem number one, which is almost similar except number one was focused on the meaning whereas this problem on the form, are combined, both constitute the biggest handicap for understanding the idea conveyed in the text. Therefore, the best solution to these problems is improving the frequency of reading practice in English texts. By improving the frequency of reading the participants may obtain *sight vocabulary* (Day, et al., 1998: 13) which is very important to develop understanding. Day, et al., (1998) state that reading comprehension begins with the accurate, swift and automatic visual recognition of vocabulary, independent of the context in which it occurs. They further state that automatic word recognition or sight vocabulary is the basis of fluent reading. It is what allows skilled readers to read with apparent ease and lack of effort, rapidly breezing through material.

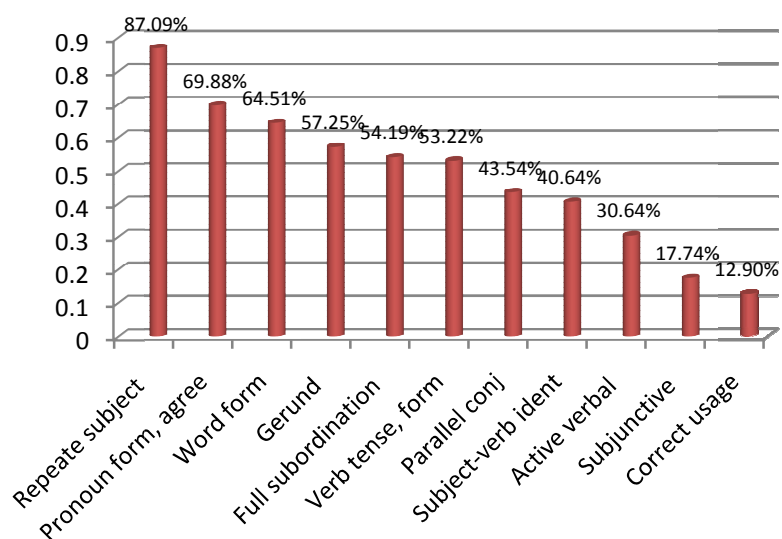
The last problem that they found was *drawing conclusion about the idea in the text*. This problem constitutes the least proportion in their report, that is, comprise 5.36 % of the total problems they reported to have encountered.

### **Acquisition of syntactic rules**

The students of Masters Degree in Educational Technology program were introduced to familiarize with the syntactic rules. Such rules are important for them because before they can take part in graduation ceremony after completing their masters' degree at Lampung University; they are supposed to take part in Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). They have to be able to obtain 450 TOEFL score. Concerning syntactic rules or grammatical structures which they acquired, Figure 3 shows the comparison of various syntactic rules that they acquired. As the figure shows, the participants were able to identify the problem of repeated subjects in TOEFL test for about 87.09%. It means that they were quite successful in identifying the problem relating to repeated either subject or

verb. Their ability to identify and solve the repeated subject which was their highest competence was then followed gradually decreasing by pronoun form, agreement and reference; word form; gerund; full subordination; verb tense, form, and agreement; parallel conjunction; subject-verb identification; active verbal; subjunctive and correct usage. As the figure shows, subjunctive and correct usage were the least acquired among the syntactic rules. All these syntactic rules would be better taught in an integrated way with other skills. Majority, if not all, of the participants in this study said (during the interview) that they felt very enthusiastic and pleased to learn English in an integrated way like what the researcher did. More importantly, based on the researcher's observation, no single participant seemed to be bored every meeting during the English class although the classes were organized after lunch time when other students in other classes are usually tired and unmotivated to learn. This suggests that the approach used was suitable and effective for them to enhance their English competence.

**Figure 3. Comparison of syntactic rules the participants acquired**



### Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the results of the data analysis and discussion, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. There were 41.93% of the non-English postgraduate students (Masters of Educational Technology Program) at the University of Lampung who were able to comprehend the main idea successfully, but majority of them were not successful yet. Although they tried hard, the results were still unsatisfactory. This might due to their lack of reading practice and exposure to English texts.
2. Majority of them (54.56%) were successful in answering factual questions which required the idea based on factual information correctly. This represents the highest reading skill that could be acquired. Their high performance might relate to the participants' efforts to get the idea based on what was *stated* in the texts which might be easier for them to understand than the *unstated* information.
3. There were four kinds of reading skills which were less acquired by majority of the participants, i.e., Inference, Analogy, Follow on, and View Point. Making Inference based on contextual clues was found to be highly difficult skill for the

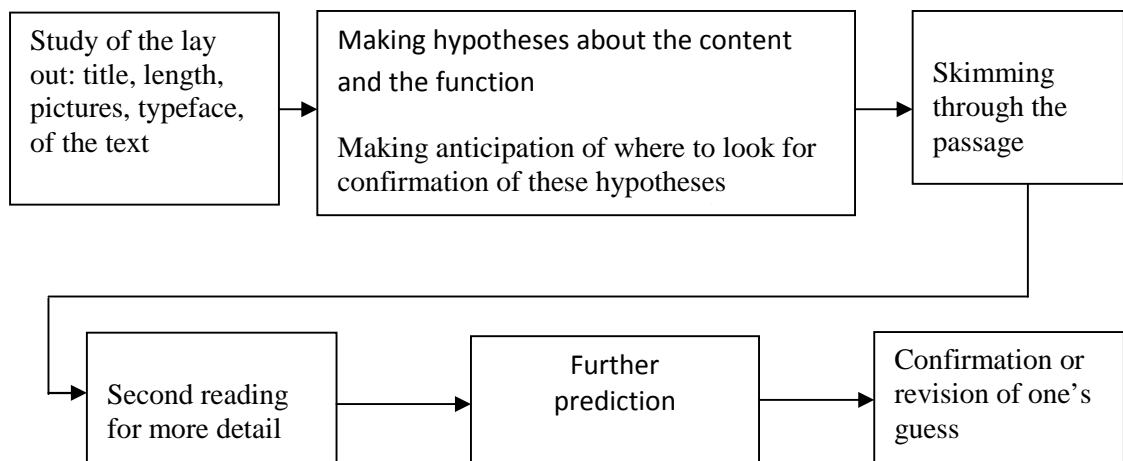
postgraduate students. There were only 11 out of 62 participants (17.74%) who could answer the questions correctly.

4. Besides skills that they acquired or were supposed to acquire, there were five major categories of problems encountered by the non-English postgraduate students: (a) *understanding meaning of words* in a text; (b) *understanding ideas conveyed in each sentence*; (c) *lack of grammatical understanding*; (d) *many difficult and new words*; and finally (e) *drawing conclusion about the idea in the text*.
5. Out of five major categories of problems, the participants found that *understanding meaning of words* in a text and *understanding ideas conveyed in each sentence* were the most problematic for them in making sense the ideas in the English texts.

### Recommendations

Based on the conclusions above, the following recommendations are addressed to help the participants in the non-English Postgraduate Program enhance the quality of their comprehension:

1. Special training on how to make sense of the ideas in English texts should be given; reading skills should be introduced and exposed to them; the frequency of reading English texts should be developed and some exposures to English discourses need to be considered to improve the participants' English comprehension competence.
2. The postgraduate students should be trained to understand and exposed to the ways of how to understand *unstated* information in a text. This is because unstated information is much more than stated information.
3. The postgraduate students should be trained to understand and exposed to the ways of how to make *inference, analogy, follows on, and view point*. Making inference, analogy, follows on, and view point requires high logical way of thinking and necessitates a lot of practice without which it is little possibility to be acquired.
4. They should be introduced and trained to make use of contextual clues to minimize and/or overcome the problems relating to (a) *understanding meaning of words* in a text; (b) *understanding ideas conveyed in each sentence*; (c) *grammatical understanding*; (d) *difficult and new words*; and (e) *drawing conclusion about the idea in the text*.
5. Finally, they should be introduced to and made familiar with *global approach* to reading comprehension as follows:





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### **Researcher's Biography**

He was born and brought up in Bandung; graduated from the English Department, IKIP Bandung (now UPI) in 1984; appointed a lecturer at English Study Program Unila in 1987; took Graduate Diploma in Applied Linguistics (Dipp. App. Ling) in RELC Singapore in 1988/1989; studied Interpreting and Translating Post Graduate Diploma (Dip I/T) for one year at Deakin University, Australia, finished in December 30, 1991; in February 1993, took M.A. Degree at the Linguistic Department, Monash University, Australia, finished in April 1994. Finally from 1 November 1997 through 31 December 2000, he took a Ph.D. Program at La Trobe University, Australia.