



The Use of Learners' Background Knowledge to Connect to Text on Reading Comprehension

Penggunaan Pengetahuan Latar Belakang Pembelajaran untuk Menghubungkan ke Teks pada Pemahaman Membaca

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ABSTRAK

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui jenis-jenis skema yang digunakan siswa dalam pemahaman bacaan; dan tingkat pembelajaran yang dimiliki siswa saat menggunakan pengetahuan latar belakang pada pemahaman bacaan. Peneliti menggunakan tes membaca dan wawancara sebagai sumber data dalam penelitian ini. Partisipan penelitian ini adalah 13 mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris. Hasil analisis data menunjukkan bahwa siswa menggunakan skema linguistik dan skema isi dalam memahami tes membaca. Selain itu, tingkat belajar membaca siswa juga diukur. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa 31% siswa melakukan pembelajaran tingkat dalam dan 69% di antaranya menerapkan pembelajaran tingkat permukaan. Hal itu diukur dari hasil tes membaca mereka menggunakan strategi membuat koneksi.

Kata Kunci: Pemahaman Bacaan, Pengetahuan Latar Belakang, Membuat Koneksi

ABSTRACT

The research objectives are to know the types of schema used by the students in reading comprehension; and the level of learning the students have while using background knowledge on reading comprehension. The researcher used reading tests and interviews as data sources in this research. The research participant was 13 students of the English Education Study Program. The result of the data analysis presents that students used linguistic schema and content schema in understanding the reading test. Other than that, the level of students' learning in reading was also measured. The result presented that 31% of students performed a deep level learning and 69% of them applied a surface level learning. It was measured by their reading test results using the Making Connection strategy.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Background Knowledge, Making Connection

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning English is a challenging thing for EFL learners. However, they must be aware that it is crucial and can create many great opportunities. Reading plays a dominant role in learning English (Carrell et al., 1988). Grabe & Stoller (2001) defined it as the most crucial academic language skill for second language students. Richards & Renandya (2002) claimed that the

particular focus reading receives in foreign language teaching. There are two reasons behind this. First, many foreign language students see reading as one of their most important goals. Second, various pedagogical purposes served by written texts help reading to receive this particular focus.

Rumelhart (1980) argued that background knowledge plays a more significant role than new words and

structures in reading comprehension. Teachers are expected to activate the students' background knowledge first before the students try to comprehend the meaning from a passage. Background knowledge here refers to prior knowledge, which is also known as a schema. Bartlett (1932) defined a schema as "an active organization of past reactions of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operational in any well-adapted organic response". Rumelhart (1980) defined schema as a data structure representing the genetic concepts stored in memory. He claimed schema theory describes how readers use background knowledge to understand and learn from the text. Based on those definitions, it is concluded that schema is a general knowledge stored in our memory that is used to understand a text.

The role of schemata is that readers can make sense of visual information and understand a text by connecting them to their prior knowledge and previous experience. In other words, schema theory explains how readers integrate the new information with the previous information stored in their memory. Schema theory influences reading comprehension. Many researchers analyzed the role of prior knowledge and they have presented that it has a significant impact on reading comprehension in a foreign language. Those researchers pointed out that understanding the function of schema in the reading activity supplies a deep understanding of why students may fail or succeed in understanding the written text.

Carrell et al. (1988) indicate that second and foreign language teachers should minimize their students' reading problems by delivering familiar content that includes appropriate background information. The selected reading materials must activate students' specific prior knowledge, leading to a better understanding of what is being read. Moreover, teachers should guide their students to activate and use their schema to help them become better readers. Students become better readers when they can connect to text to comprehend it better. Teachers are expected to teach students to connect one reading by presenting a making connection strategy. These research objectives are to know the types of schema the students use on reading comprehension and to know the level of connection the students have while using background knowledge on reading comprehension.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Background knowledge or prior knowledge is also known as schema. (Bartlett, 1932) defines schema as 'an active organization of past reactions of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operational in any well-adapted organic response. Janet G. Hell, Bosman, Wiggers, & Stoit, (2003) points out that schemata are typified as organized representations of one's experiences. In other words, background or prior knowledge is the knowledge that the learners already have about something before they come across new information. This includes facts, concepts, rules, principles and so on. Carrell et al. (1988) highlight the three major types of schema, namely, linguistics schemata, formal schemata, and content schemata.

Making Connections is a strategy that can assist in making meaning from a text. It is one way teachers can help learners understand what they are reading. . Teachers are expected to teach students to connect one reading with three things by presenting the strategy of making connections. According to Keene and Zimmermann (1997), readers make three types of connections before, during, or after reading, namely text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world.

There have been several attempts to deliver a conceptual framework for different levels of learning. A notable sample uses a distinction between surface and deep learning approaches. Bennet, D., & Bennet, A. (2008) explored knowledge in terms of surface, shallow and deep levels. surface learning is where students know about the subject that requires minimum understanding. In contrast, deep learning means students can fully understand something and make valid statements about it. The researcher used these terms to categorize the students' connection level to text.

3. METHOD

This research used the descriptive qualitative method, which was descriptive research. It means that collected data was in words rather than the number. The research participants were the students of the English Education Program in the 6th semester at the State University of Makassar. The researcher chose one class of English Education Program in the academic year 2019/2020. Moreover, due to the pandemic in which all classes were done virtually, only 13 students agreed to participate. All the students in the class were given a reading test via Google Form. They were also

interviewed virtually by using an audio recorder. The participants were all Indonesians from different cultures, such as Buginese, Makassar's, etc.

Reading tests and interviews were used in analyzing reading comprehension. The students were given two different kinds of reading test consisting of questions related to their reading comprehension. The researcher also interviewed students regarding their background knowledge of reading comprehension and how it helped them understand a text better. Interview was done after the students were done with the reading test. The researcher used the data analysis method by Miles and Huberman (2019) in analyzing the data. They presented that data analysis consists of three concurrent activities, including data reduction, data display, and verification.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Types of Schema the Students Use on Reading Comprehension

The researcher gave a reading test to know the types of schema students use on their reading comprehension. The students were instructed to answer ten multiple-choice questions and exact reasons. These reasons are analyzed based on the types of schema used in the test. The following are examples of the types of the schema used by the students on reading comprehension:

a. Linguistics Schema

The below response is one of the students' responses which shows her linguistic schema as she managed to compare the differences of the use of "hope" in literal meaning and the name of the street:

"I choose B because in paragraph 4, it is mentioned about Hope Street which runs directly between the two Cathedrals. While most of the answer option are about 'hope' in literal meaning and not about the street. Only one of them are about taking the Hope Street (B). So this must be the right answer" (AY, Q4).

It means that she had a wide range of language proficiency in vocabulary. When readers use their vocabulary mastery in understanding text, it means they successfully applied their linguistic schema. This statement is supported by Zhao and Zhu (2012), who claimed that linguistic schema refers to the readers' understanding about phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary.

However, when the students failed to use their linguistic schema, they would choose an incorrect answer. The statement was proven by the sample below:

"I chose housing center because the text mentioned 'In 1984 it was reopened as a social and business center, and it now houses an exciting number of shops, restaurants and exhibitions halls.'" (AF, Q8) The student's responses indicated that they misinterpreted the keywords' house', so it led to picking the wrong answer. They thought the answer was 'housing center' as a similar word 'houses' was mentioned in the text. In a text, the term 'house' refers to the verb, not the noun.

b. Content Schema

The readers' cultural knowledge is one example of content schema. As Zhao and Zhue (2012) explained that content schema involves readers' topic familiarity, cultural knowledge, conventions, and previous experience. Below is one of the students' responses of an answer to the question, in which the students had to guess what the Beatles refers to in the text they had read:

"Because I have heard about the band before, so even if I didn't read the text, I would assume that The Beatles is the band" (FI, Q1)

The text mentioned that Liverpool was the home of the Beatles. The Beatles was an English rock band formed in Liverpool in 1960. Therefore, the students' answer about The Beatles being referred to music group were correct. They could answer the questions correctly due to their topic familiarity and cultural knowledge. In contrast, when students failed to use their linguistic schema, they would choose incorrect answers. The following sample can prove this statement:

"The answer I chose was 'football team' because Liverpool has a lot of culture so the Beatles is a part of it." (RE, Q1)

This sample response shows students' lack of content schema. They were unfamiliar with the term the Beatles. The students' responses demonstrate the use of schema in reading comprehension. Some of them had difficulty choosing the correct answer due to the lack of exposure to the linguistic and content schema, leading to a lack of knowledge of phrases, including culture. This difficulty affects their ability to comprehend the text better.

Student RA answered that her cultural background in music and movies helped her understand the text better. Sabatin (2013) in his study argued that there is a notable difference in performance in reading comprehension between readers who have cultural knowledge and those who do not have any knowledge. It was mentioned previously that cultural background is part of the content schema.

4.2. Students’ Level of Learning in Connecting to Text

The researcher also measured students’ level of connection with making connection rubric. Making Connections is a strategy that can aid students in making meaning from a text. It is a quick and easy way to present the meaning of words or string words. Students are expected to understand better what they are reading.

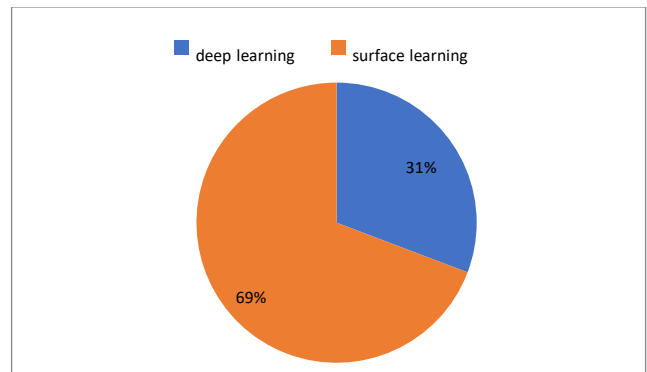
The students were asked to do making connection rubric between the text and themselves. Student responses were analyzed and classified as “Surface Level Learning” and “Deeper Level Learning”. Surface level learning is where one can state that the text given is like what they have seen or learned. Meanwhile, a deeper level learning is where one can compare or explain how the two things are identical or different. Table 1 portrays the types of student responses that would reflect each type.

Tabel 1. Sample of student’s answer in Making Connection

Students’ sample of this type of connection: “British Wedding”	
Student AS	Student MA
Surface Level Learning	Deeper Level Learning
“The wedding reception is closely same like the wedding in my culture”	“This reminds me when I was attended a wedding celebration. The ceremony was held in a church where the couple takes a solemn promise and live together for the rest of their life. After that the wedding party continues.”

Answers considered to be given by using a surface learning to background knowledge tended to restate provided quotes without profound explanation. In contrast, answers considered to be a deeper level connection tended to elaborate the similarity of the text to themselves. Student AS’s response is categorized as surface-level because she only stated that the British

wedding was somewhat like the wedding in her culture without giving the details on which part was considered equal. Meanwhile, student MA’s response successfully shared his deeper level learning in which he elaborated how the term reminds her of a wedding celebration she once attended.



Picture 1. Results of Students’ Making Connection

The figure above also shows that the participants could connect to their prior knowledge of the text. However, it displays that only 31% of students performed a deeper learning level when reading the text. Meanwhile, the 69% of the students could only create a surface-level learning to the text. It suggests that not even half of them could provide an answer that used deeper background knowledge.

This activity did not only help students understand a text, but it could also impact the broader aspect of learning. When students are reading novels with historical backgrounds, the students must be provided with the background knowledge to make meaningful transactions between the reader and the text. When readers connect the text to self, other texts, and events happening in the world, they deliver a more precise focus to use different reading comprehension techniques. The result of the research interview supports this finding. The students were asked whether providing background information related to the reading text before they are assigned to do exercise on the text helps them better understand the reading text.

4.3. Analysis of Students Responses from the Interview

The researcher interviewed students to understand their exposure to background knowledge in reading class. The first part of the question is related to the reading test before the interview.

Q1 : "Was the text you read easy or difficult? Why?"

MA : "Easy. I can understand the given text because it's familiar to a text that I've faced when I was taking a test."

This sample of students' responses shows that the text was easy to understand because they already have prior knowledge about it. However, the text can be difficult when one does not have sufficient prior knowledge before reading the text. It was shown in the following response:

AF : "For me it's difficult because my vocabulary is very low."

The above response suggests that the students had difficulties in their vocabulary. It means they are lack in grammatical and lexical items. Those two items are aspects from the linguistic background knowledge.

The following is the second part of the interview questions, which consists of questions related to their prior knowledge and cultural knowledge in reading class:

Q3 : "Do you think it's necessary for you to have any prior knowledge and/or cultural knowledge before reading comprehension tasks? Why/ Why not?"

SS : "Yes, because we can relate more to the topics."

The students agreed that the teachers should provide any background information related to the reading text before they do read test as it will help them understand the topic better.

Without the proper understanding of reading, reading is viewed as a tiresome activity when readers do not have a profound understanding of it. It is safe to say that the students' ability to comprehend a text better will affect their entire lives. One of the ultimate goals in teaching reading comprehension is to help students extend their knowledge, skills, and experiences to be good readers. Therefore, the researcher felt the need to identify which types of schema or background knowledge students tend to use in reading. Once it is identified, it would become a reference for the teachers to try to activate any of these types of schema if students are stuck in reading.

5. CONCLUSION

The researcher gained insight into the types of schema used by the students in reading comprehension. It was

identified that students mostly used their linguistic schema and content schema in answering the questions. The linguistic schema is related to students' vocabulary mastery in answering the questions, while content schema is related to their cultural knowledge. The students' level of learning used in reading comprehension was analyzed by using the making connection activity where students were instructed to connect the text to themselves. The result showed that 69% of students completed the making connection activity by using surface-level learning. Surface-level learning means the students acknowledged that two things were similar. In contrast, the rest of the students successfully adopted a deeper level learning where they realized two things were similar, and they could also compare how things were used for the same purpose. It indicates that the students tend to use surface learning in connecting the text.

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