

# SENSITIZING TECHNIQUE TO IMPROVE EFL STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION

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## ABSTRACT

*This study was intended to develop a learning strategy that could improve their reading comprehension. The strategy selected was sensitizing technique. It was developed for the sake of improving the students' reading comprehension, namely: literal comprehension, interpretive comprehension and critical comprehension. The study was Classroom Action Research. The procedure of the research consisted of four major steps namely; planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting. It consisted of two cycles. Each of them consisted of three meetings for the teaching learning process and one meeting for quiz. The result of the research showed that sensitizing reading technique was effective in increasing the students' reading comprehension achievements. This fact was clearly indicated by the increasing of percentages of achievement through the cycles of action that was 52.7 % (Pre-test), 66.9 % (Cycle 1), and 81.8 % (Cycle 2). The scores had fulfilled the criteria of success in implementing sensitizing-reading technique namely the improvement of students' reading comprehension ability.*

*Key word: Sensitizing, literal, interpretive, and critical comprehension*

## INTRODUCTION

In general, the skills involved in mastering English are listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Among them, reading is the most important factor that can support the process of mastering the other skills and improving knowledge. In spite of the importance, the fact shows that not every individual learns it well. Nunan (1999: 249) states that unlike speaking and reading are not something that every individual learns to do. An enormous amount of time, money, and effort is spent for teaching reading in elementary and secondary schools around the world. In fact, it is probably true to say that more time is spent in teaching reading than any other skills.

To teach students to read, a teacher often finds some problems. The first problem is the students' reading comprehension is lower compared to the other scores like writing, speaking and listening. One of possibilities is caused by the reading technique applied in the classroom. Moreover, they do not know what kinds of reading techniques that should be mastered first. This lower comprehension is due to the fact that the reading techniques that are applied do not match with the students' competence. They tend to teach without considering the order of the reading techniques. Directly they teach certain technique like skimming, scanning, and finding main idea to the students. Moreover, Grellet (1990) stated that the teacher should give basic reading techniques first before they are given skimming, scanning, and finding main idea. In this case they

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should understand first about sensitizing techniques, as a basic skill should be mastered. The second is low interest may account for some aspects of the problem. Many teachers, believing that the problem is inability to comprehend reading text effectively, have tried diligently to use instructional strategies that help students improve their ability to read expository text. Such learning from-text strategies, as stated by Tony Ridgway (1997), include mapping techniques (Alvermann, 1986; Flood & Lapp, 1988), summarizing techniques (Brown, Campione, & Day, 1981; Taylor, 1982), constructing graphic organizers (Danserau, Holley, & Collins, 1980; Jones, 1985), questioning strategies (Ciardiello, 1986; Gilmore & McKinney, 1986; Raphael & Pearson, 1982), and applying one's prior knowledge (Bransford & Johnson, 1972; Pearson, Hansen, & Gordon, 1979) in Mathison (1989: 171).

If the problem was only inability, it would seem that once students were armed with these strategies and were able to read their textbooks, they would do so. But many of us who spend countless hours working with high school teachers and students realize that ability alone may not be enough to induce students to open their books. What students can do and what they choose to do remain two intertwined but subtly different instructional concerns. They are motivation, textbooks, and reading technique. The focus of instruction needs to include an emphasis on the factors that motivate students to read their textbooks as well as factors that enhance reading ability (Mathison, 1989: 171). Kweldju (1994:42) states that motivation is one such an effective factor crucial to successful textbook reading. Poor motivation may cause even the most able reader not to read a required textbook. High motivation, on the other hand, energizes readers to continually interact with the text. Highly motivated readers tend to involve themselves in on-going process of interpreting and assimilating the author's main idea within the framework of their own prior knowledge and experience. Teachers need to learn to manipulate this factor to promote student learning

To determine what to do, in relation to reading, we need to develop a strategy as well as to increased students' comprehension and motivation to read. One of the strategies applied is sensitizing technique. It is given to equip the learners with awareness of how ideas are organized in a passage.

### **Research Subject**

The subjects of the research are the first year students of the English Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Islamic University of Riau. The writer chooses the 'G' class that consists of 55 students because this class is being observed for the reading problems. These students have studied English for at least 3 months in English Department. Despite the materials the students have gotten during the time, they still have difficulties in comprehending a reading passage. These difficulties are due to some factors, such as lack of the knowledge to comprehend the message or the idea of the passage.

### **Action Research Procedure**

This research is implemented using action research design. This study starts with preliminary observation or fact and finding analysis to find the problem faced by the teacher and students, and then the activity is followed by planning, implementing, observing, analyzing and reflecting. These activities can be continued to the next cycles

if the previous cycles failed. This research applied three cycles for the whole process, depending on the condition of each cycle result

## **1. Fact Finding and Analysis**

During the fact-finding and analysis phase, the real situations including students' problems in learning English are described. In this phase, the students' reading comprehension achievement is measured using a reading comprehension level test. The classroom teaching learning process, including students' and teachers' activities, lesson plan, and classroom atmosphere are identified and analyzed as well.

From the fact-finding and analysis phase related to their reading, some problems were discovered. Reading classes in this Department are all intensive reading courses. Students read the reading text for the sake of answering the exercises. They are accustomed to comprehending passages. They often get problems related to the limited vocabulary. They get difficulties to comprehend interpretive and critical questions. They often have to open the dictionary to find the meaning of the words. These facts disturb and discourage them to read more. They read English just to fulfill the tasks given by the teacher. Moreover, the teacher gives questions related to literal comprehension only. He or she never focuses on other aspects of comprehension like interpretive and critical questions. As a result, the students get difficulty to answer these types of questions. Moreover, the teacher directly teaches the students about reading techniques like skimming, scanning, and summarizing without considering the order of reading techniques or which techniques should be given first. It will be very hard for them to get better understanding in reading comprehension.

## **2. Planning**

Before implementing the real action research, the researcher makes a plan for the sake of maximizing the reading course using sensitizing technique to improve the students' reading comprehension. This phase includes some sub phases namely designing lesson plans, preparing materials and media, and preparing the criteria of success.

### **a. Designing the Lesson Plan**

The lesson plan proposed in this action research is based on its purpose namely to improve the students' reading comprehension. The activity in the lesson plan is stressed on comprehending the sensitizing techniques; namely; inference (word-formation and derivation), understanding the relation within a sentence and practicing with linking sentence and ideas. The activities are in-class-activities, and guided by the researcher since the researcher is also the real teacher of the researched class. During the activities the teacher checks the students' comprehension on the literal, interpretive and critical comprehension on the text given as it is stated in the lesson plan.

### **b. Preparing Instructional Materials**

The lecturer prepares the materials of the course. It contains exercises that provide practice in basic reading skill for intermediate students of English as a second

language (ESL). The two foremost goals of the text are that intermediate ESL students develop important reading skills and that they increase their general vocabulary. The reading skills emphasized in this text are inference (word-formation and derivation), understanding the relation within sentence and finally practicing with linking sentence and ideas. By applying this material it is hoped that the students' reading comprehension will be improved.

### **c. Preparing the Criteria of Success**

This study deals with improving students' reading comprehension skill by applying sensitizing techniques. The criteria of success should be in this concern. The students' improvement in reading comprehension after the implementation of the action research is described in three kinds of comprehension, namely: literal comprehension, interpretive comprehension, and evaluative comprehension. Yet, the criteria of success need to be formulated in order to make it easy to determine whether the intended improvement is reached. Based on the previous theory and the condition of the students, the criteria of success of the study are determined as follows:

- The students' average score of the reading test is 70.
- The students are motivated to join the activities on the technique.

### **3. Implementing the Action**

The implementation of the action research is the activity done as they are arranged in the lesson plan. It is done in planned cycles. The researcher implements this research in two cycles. Each of them consists of three meetings. In every meeting the researcher focuses on sensitizing techniques for the sake of improving the students' reading comprehension ability.

### **4. Observing**

During the phase, the teacher-researcher monitors the implementation of the action as it is previously planned. In this phase the data collecting is conducted. The data collecting activity is actually done at the same time as the teaching learning process. Since the data are collected through observation, the data obtained are qualitative. The researcher then must interpret the data so that she can understand the condition including the difficulties faced during the implementation of the action.

#### **a. Research Instrument**

As the characteristic of qualitative research, the key instrument of the present study is the researcher herself. Furthermore, other instruments are used to support the data gathering in the study. Those instruments are in the forms of observation checklist, field note, test and questionnaire.

#### **b. Observation Checklist**

Observation Checklist is used to collect the data about students' activities in the implementation of the procedures. The researcher collects the data herself.

### **c. Field Note**

Field Note is used to note the facts dealing with the implementation of the actions that cannot be put in observation lists. This note is focused on the interaction between teacher and students as well as student with student. The interaction related to teacher is the one suitable with the steps described on the planning. The note related to students is the appropriateness between students' behavior with the behavior stated in the criteria of students' successes stated before that is the students' score is 70. From the result, the researcher draws a reflection on the framework and opinion that can be used as a basis of forming the following planning.

### **d. Test**

A test is employed to find out the product of teaching learning process. The test is on reading comprehension skill. In this study the researcher administers pretest and post-test to check the students' reading comprehension ability. The result of pre-test represents the starting point of the students' reading skill before implementing the teaching learning process using sensitizing techniques, while the result of post-test represents the students' reading comprehension skill after the implementation of teaching learning process using sensitizing technique. The writer chooses multiple choice tests because it is easy to administer, it is easy to correct and it can minimize the subjectivity of the test.

### **e. Questionnaire**

A questionnaire is used to find out the students' response on the procedure implemented in teaching learning process. By using this instrument, it is hoped that the researcher knows the students' opinion on the process, the change of their motivation to read, and the difficulties they have related to the implementation of the action. The information gathered can be used as a basic interpretation to improve and revise the plan if it is needed.

## **5. Reflecting**

Reflecting is the activity of analyzing, synthesizing, interpreting and explaining the information obtained from implementation activity. In this phase, the researcher has to make a valid conclusion on the data obtained. The most important aspects the researcher has to pay attention to are: (1) the match between the implementing and the planning formulated before, (2) The handicaps that possibly happen during the teaching learning process, and (3) The improvement achieved by the students.

The main activity in this phase is comparing the result of observing phase and the criteria of success determined before. The result of the reflection is used as information for considering the following action. If the result of reflection in a cycle shows that the criteria of success have been fulfilled, the researcher stops implementing for the following cycle. On the other hand, if the result of the reflection does show that the result does not fulfill the criteria determined, the researcher has to revise the planning and implement it in the following cycle.

To reduce the researcher's opinions, biases, and prejudices, the researcher does triangulation to check the trustworthiness of the data analysis. The triangulation is in the form of (1) cross-checking with other colleagues and (2) cross-checking with the

advisors. In this case, the researcher starts cross-checking from the process of making instruments steps to reflection steps.

## **RESULT**

This part covers the discussion on the implementation of sensitizing technique throughout the action research from setting instructional objectives, planning and structuring the tasks, giving chart to evaluate the students' achievement on their daily practices in doing the exercises, and its application in three phases of activities namely pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading.

Prior to the implementation of sensitizing technique, setting the instructional objective, planning and structuring the tasks were set up. Setting the instructional objectives, planning, and structuring the tasks was very important in any classroom activity. The instructional objectives determined the direction of teaching and learning process. The objectives also determined what the teacher should prepare, what the teacher should evaluate as well as how to do it. After the objectives were specified, the tasks were structured. As Mc. Donell (in Kessler, 1992) said, "The learning experiences that are planned and structured allow learners to have the opportunity to build on what they already know, to have a clear sense of direction, and have enough time to develop the students' understanding.

Related to time employed in classroom activities, it was already attempted to use it wisely. The hundred minutes planned was divided into three activities according to the stages of activities in reading comprehension with a division of 15 minutes for *Pre-reading*, 75 minutes for *While-reading*, and 10 minutes for *Post-reading*. Though it was designed as carefully as possible, it seemed that there were still weaknesses. Seemingly, the time was not enough to accomplish the material planned especially for the first meeting in Cycle 1. In this part, the lecturer had to give explanation about the implementation of sensitizing technique since most students had no background knowledge about the technique. Such weakness did not occur in the following meetings and chapters since the students had understood what sensitizing technique was, and they just applied the instruction to do the task from the worksheet.

During the application of sensitizing technique, the lecturer had to pay more attention to every activity and exercise done by the students. In this part the lecturer fully controlled the exercises. To support the classroom activity, especially in doing the reading comprehension exercises, the lecturer provided charts that were used by every student to write down their progress for every task they did. Using the chart, it could help the teacher to monitor the students' progress individually on the exercise given. It was also very useful for them since they could evaluate themselves to measure their individual progress toward the material. It was in line with some of the students' opinion on their comments on the questionnaires that they like to do the task because they could evaluate their ability objectively and logically together with the lecturer. The charts also enabled the students to know their strengths and weaknesses from time to time that enabled them to determine what should be stressed on their study.

**Pre-reading** activity which started by asking the students' comprehension on the related topics, was to facilitate students to recall their prior knowledge dealing with the topics discussed. The pre-reading segment by discussing general information that the lecturer introduced to students and probing it from the students, could bring the students to the situation that generated expectations that were useful in anticipating and

predicting the content of the materials or texts to read. Burden and Byrd (1999) stated that “Pre-reading activities are used to activate the students’ prior knowledge and to help motivate students to read. The activities also promote specific skills in students such as defining the purpose of reading, asking questions, making predictions, figuring out the meaning of unfamiliar word, and relating new material to what is already known”. Related to schemata or prior knowledge activated through pre-reading activities, Mc Neil (1992:19) states “in reading, schemata are used to make sense of text; the printed words evoke the reader’s experiences, as well as past and potential relationship”.

In the process of learning, naturally the students liked to know what they discussed. The Pre-reading activity was really intended to fulfill the condition to make them like the lesson or the topics. When they had understood what was discussed most probably they would like to have more information, they would like to fulfill their curiosity, and then they would get involved in the activity.

Besides the pre-reading activity, the sensitizing also strongly affected the students’ interest to learn because they could get involved in the teaching learning process and they liked the class atmosphere. This fact was supported by the result of questionnaire in which they liked the class atmosphere because in the class they could measure themselves regarding their strengths and weaknesses and they could discuss the problem logically and freely with the class and the lecturer. The condition was in line with the opinion of Kasbolah (1993: 56) which stated “the interest of learning would increase when the learning condition was interesting and enjoyable”. She further claimed that the learning of a foreign language had to be supported by an interesting situation.

**Whilst-reading.** The activities in whilst-reading were divided into six different activities. They were *inference*, *context clues*, *logical connectors*, *relation within the sentence*, *reference*, and *reading exercises*. The activity of using inference in the first cycle was applied slightly different from the second Cycle. At the first Cycle, it was found that most of the students did not understand what *inference* was. That is why, in this part the lecturer had to explain the definition as well as the way how it worked. Consequently the activity was time consuming. The students at last understood the use of inference after they did the exercises and discussed the material in the classroom. In doing the exercise, it was found that the students’ achievement was not sufficient. It seemed that they were not accustomed to doing this technique. They still did the exercise slowly and frequently consulted their dictionary. They seemed to have self confidence to answer if they had looked up their dictionary regardless of the lecturer’s explanation about the procedures of using both techniques.

Knowing the fact, at the following meeting the lecturer discussed their way to do the exercise about inference before doing the similar exercise about it. The students then tried to do the technique regardless of the difficulties they had. Step by step, the process could affect their way to do the exercise and they seemed to be accustomed to doing that after some practices. In line with it, the students could understand the techniques and slowly they had a sense or awareness of sensitizing technique to do the exercise as well as improving their ability.

The following step applied context clues technique. As it was said before applying this technique was intended to help the students to find the specific context rapidly. It was done through some steps like word formation and derivation, synonyms

and antonyms, lexical sets and collocation, and hyponymy. The lecturer trained the students to apply this technique by asking them to do the exercise in a given time. For the first meeting there were some difficulties especially about the students' habit to always consult their dictionary before they answered the question. Based on the teaching learning process, it was found that they could not differentiate whether a word was a noun, an adjective, a verb or an adverb. It was one of the common mistake sources that blocked their awareness of how reading is organized. Consequently, the reading process was lower. They sometimes also found difficulties in determining whether *select*, *selection*, *selective* and *selectively* were the same kind of words or not. In this action to overcome the problem, the lecturer emphasized her explanation on the way to differentiate the kinds of word so that they would not find any difficulties in this part anymore.

In this part, the students had to read a short paragraph, trying to discover the answer in the context by using appropriate class of word. The exercises were conducted in filling the gap and in the form of multiple-choice format to find out the correct form of the word.

The other skill applied after a contextual clue was logical connectors. It could help the students to increase their awareness of how an idea was combined by logical connectors. In this part the students were required to answer not only correctly but fast as well. As Folse (1993:14) said, "in order to do reading exercises very quickly and very accurately, you must be able to find an answer for a question rapidly. If you read the paragraph very carefully, you can find the answer easily. However, you need to learn to find the correct answer as quickly as you can. It is very important to be correct and in time". Finally, the students are able to analyze the cause and effect text, additional explanation using 'conjunction', answer the exercises well.

The following activity of the teaching learning process was relation within the sentence and idea. In this part, the teacher trained the students using the principle of sentences and ideas. This technique was related to how the author explained his or her idea in a text or passage. This part was not too difficult for the students because they could do the exercise given well.

The next activity in the teaching and learning process was reference. This technique relied on the reference in the texts. It gave the students awareness of how certain word would refer to something in the passage. In the first part of the teaching, the students got some difficulties to refer to some questions from the text. Then, the teacher trained them using some examples by giving a table to show where the referred thing was located. As a result, the students were able to complete the exercise well and faster.

The last activity was reading exercises. Each exercise had 10 problems. The students had to accomplish them in determined time, so they had to work as effectively as possible. They had to be careful not to make any mistake since the score was the number of correct answers minus the number of wrong answers. The exercises were conducted into two types. The first type was in the form of multiple choice and matching exercises. There was an assessment chart that helped the students to see their improvement and to monitor their strengths and weaknesses as a guidance to get feedback and to conduct improvement.

Based on the observation, it was found that the students were very interested in the activity. The researcher could clearly see the students' behavior when they knew

their result of the exercise. Especially when the teacher announce the score of the exercise. Those who got good results looked happy; on the other hand, those who got bad results seemed to be disappointed. But both of them seemed very enthusiastic in doing the exercise. With the chart, the teacher could really see that the students were very competitive to do the exercises. The problem which often occurred was the misunderstanding about the directions. As it was stated, the students had to circle the word chosen. But the fact showed that the students often just gave a tick or other specific sign that made the time needed shorter. To overcome the problem, the lecturer had to check the students' work carefully before doing the discussion or checking their work. After some checks at last the lecturer could be sure that the students did the exercise correctly. Then, the teacher reinforces the students by announcing their score in the classroom. So, the students will be motivated to compete.

During the process the students were not allowed to consult their dictionary or discussed the problems with their friends. They had to apply the techniques they got such as inference, context clues, logical connectors, relation within the sentence and reference and some reading exercises. After the allotted time was over, the lecturer said "stop". All of the students had to stop their work regardless of the results. The lecturer then discussed the results of the students' answers together with them. In this chance the students were invited to express their arguments related to the answers they made. They had to use their logical thinking so that they could make sure that their answers were correct and admitted by the lecturer and their friends. In this step the situation was rather noisy but the students seemed to enjoy the situation.

The other merit was that the students were involved to discuss their answer together with the class. In this part they could argue with one another and even with the lecturer using their logical thinking. The lecturer intended to make the class' atmosphere as democratic as possible, and he could perceive that the students were very interested and enthusiastic to take part.

**Post Reading.** The post reading stage was provided with the tasks containing some exercises which were aimed to know the students' understanding about the topics that had been discussed. For the time was limited to discuss the questions, some tasks were done at home. The rest of the time was spent to discuss the unfinished questions or to strengthen the students' understanding on certain topics.

### **The Results of the Students' Learning Achievement in Reading**

The results of the students' learning achievements in reading comprehension throughout the research were classified into two different types, namely the result based on process and based on product. The students' learning achievement based on process was obtained through the result of the teaching learning process where the students applied the sensitizing technique in the part of *reading exercise*. The students' reading achievement based on product was derived from the result of the students' achievement in doing the pretest and the two different quizzes.

To recognize whether the students' learning process was effective or not the researcher measured their achievement in doing the *reading exercise* through the chart that each student had and monitor the students' motivation in the classroom activity. The results of the two kinds of exercises were listed in the charts. The students wrote

the result of those exercises directly after they finished them. The charts then were submitted to the lecturer at the end of the cycles to be analyzed.

Based on the result of the students' charts, it was found that there was a tendency that the students' ability in doing every exercise from the first up to the second cycle tended to increase from time to time. But the improvement was still too low and not significant. That was why the researcher considered that the teaching learning process should be increased.

In Cycle 2, based on the result of the students' charts, it was found that there was a tendency that the students' ability tended to increase from time to time. Not only in inference and logical connectors but also in reference, relations within the sentence and context clues also increased significantly. The score of the students gradually increased. Finally, the students' mean score on the first meeting exercise 5 was 0.81, exercise 6 was 0.44, for the second meeting exercise 6 and 7 were 0.66 and 0.56, and for the third meeting were 0.28 and 0.25.

Based on the result of the exercises, it was found that the numbers of students' *mistakes* in doing the reading *exercise* were getting lower and lower.

From the data about the *process* above we could see that there were improvement in students' skill as it was presented by the previous data . That was why the researcher considered that the action of Cycle 2 was sufficient and she stopped the action as far as this cycle.

The students' reading achievement based on product was derived from the result of the students' achievement in doing the pretest and the two different quizzes. From those quizzes, it was evident that the students' achievements gradually increased. It was proved by the students' score in pre-test, Quiz 1 and Quiz 2.

## **SUMMARY**

In relation to the implementation of sensitizing technique, some strengths of the technique are elaborated. Firstly, the sensitizing technique could help the students to increase their awareness of how sentence patterns and idea in the passages or texts are combined and organized. For example, in the application of context clues, it was not necessary for the students to always open their dictionary when they wanted to understand the text. The students could even make a better prediction toward the clues by looking at the context of the paragraph, or by using hyponymy. Moreover, in the application of logical connectors, it could help them to understand the content of certain passages and answer questions correctly as well. Then, by applying hyponymy and collocation, the students were able to classify the meaning of texts based on the super and subordinate, synonyms and antonyms, and word partnership very well and solve the question without depending on their dictionaries.

Secondly, sensitizing technique also increased their motivation to get involved in the classroom activities and their willingness to study harder. The implementation of these techniques gave them challenges to improve their sense or awareness or skill to solve the problems in reading comprehension. Systematic valuation applied in the reading exercises and quizzes encouraged them to force themselves to do the best since they could directly evaluate their ability through the direct discussion for their daily work in class freely.

Thirdly, sensitizing technique could improve the students reading comprehension skills. It was effective especially in interpretive and critical

comprehension. It was proved by the result of the research where this technique was effective in the two kinds of reading, which was shown by the students' score improvement in the research.

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