

Making a Reading Course

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In Indonesia, university students and teacher-trainees are usually required to take a course in English as a part of their study. The aim of the course is to develop their reading ability so that they can read books in English related to their field of study. However, most reading courses tend to be based not on the particular needs of the learners, but on some pre-arranged structural grading and on the teacher's or course designer's ideas about how reading should be taught. This article describes a different approach.

A study was made of three main areas, the particular problems in reading English that faced the learners, the learners' preferences with regard to material for reading, and the positive effects of the learners' reading ability in Indonesian on reading in English. The greater part of this article is devoted to the first of these areas.

The tests and the findings

The 1,000 word level material of Hill (1965) was used as the basis for the investigation of the reading problems. Tests were made to locate reading problems at this level.

Two vocabulary tests were given, one using translation of single words in a sentence context, such as:

1. *He* wanted to do it.
2. I *like* that.

The other used multiple-choice with an Indonesian word as the clue

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|----------|--------------|------------|----------|
| 1. rokok | a) table | 2. terbang | a) drink |
| | b) paper | | b) hurt |
| | c) flower | | c) run |
| | d) cigarette | | d) fly. |

The tests were based on a 1,000 word vocabulary. They revealed that very common words, such as pronouns, days of the week, numbers, and very common verbs were not known. The average recognition vocabulary of the learners seemed to be about 600 words.

Several passages were given to the learners to translate from English into Indonesian. All the grammatical structures in the passages were listed. Then the translations were analysed to find which structures presented difficulties to the learners. The difficult structures were then tested again in isolated sentences.

The following problems were revealed, listed in order of importance.

a) Misinterpretation of homographs. In *going to swim* and *going to market*, for example, the two meanings of *going to* were not differentiated. The 1,000 word list was found to contain at least 70 pairs like this, both meanings of each pair were frequently used in reading material at this level. The form *like*, for example, was frequently used with the meaning 'enjoy', *I like you*, and also with the meaning 'similar to', *They are like us*. Some other examples are *old* (*10 years old, I am not old*), *got* (*I have got a book, I got a book*), *there* (*There was a man in the shop, I went there.*) and so on (see George 1972, regarding homophony).

Problems of homography had three effects on the learners' translations. (i) Occasionally, because of the misinterpretation of the homograph the translation became nonsense. (ii) Sometimes the surrounding context was altered so that the translation made sense. For example, *She is ten years old* became *She is ten years older*. (Dia sepuluh tahun lebih tua.) (iii) With many of the very frequent homographs, *going to, too, there, has not*, the mistranslation still made sense without any change in the context.

I am going to get some rope

became *I am walking to get some rope*. (Saya berjalan mengambil tali.)

It's too hot

became *It's also hot*. (Itu juga panas.)

There was a man in the shop

became *At that place was a man in the shop*. (Disana ada orang didalam toko.)

A noticeable feature of many homograph mistakes was the tendency to let a problem word dominate interpretation of the context, rather than to let the context help in defining the word. The skill of interpreting words by using context is a general reading skill that is not confined to one particular language. The groundwork for such a skill could most easily be laid through appropriate practice in the mother-tongue. Code exercises (Nation *Q.C.E.T.A. Journal* forthcoming) can be used both in the mother-tongue or in English to foster this skill. The cloze exercise is also useful.

b) Misinterpretation of passive verb groups. Passives were sometimes translated as actives.

c) Failure to realize the significance of formal *it*. *It is Monday* was translated as *On Monday*, or *This Monday*.

d) Failure to realize that adjectives often precede the noun, and failure to distinguish the nominal and verbal meanings of stem+ing. *It is a painting brush* was translated as *It is a painting done with a brush*. (Ini lukisan dengan kwas.)

e) Failure to realize the significance of possessive *s*. The *s* was usually retained in the translation as a part of the preceding name. *This is John's book.* was translated as *Ini buku John's*.

f) Failure to realize the significance of plural *s*. Occasionally *the girls* was translated as *one girl*.

Learners had little or no difficulty with reading the following items: S V O, S V clause, S V, S V O adv., S be N, S be prep. N, S be adj., negatives, formal *it + V*; active sentences, simple present, simple past, present continuous; adj. + adj. + N, N of N, very + adj., stem + ing + N. Notice that the list of difficult items is much smaller than the list of those causing little or no difficulty.

It is worth considering the misinterpretation of the passive, stem+ing, formal *it*, possessive *s*, plural *s* and perhaps adj. + noun as a result of homography. The passive, for example, is marked in its regular form by the presence of a form of *be* and the *ed* ending of the participle. Both of these features are often redundant. Most learners, for example, translated *His question was answered* correctly. The context does not really allow any other interpretation. When presented with a sentence where the context allowed either a passive or an active interpretation, however, although the grammar was passive, they still considered *was* and *ed* to be redundant and translated *John was pushed* as *John pushed*. (John mendorang.) Thus the grammatical markers of the passive may be redundant because of the context, or non-redundant when the context but not the structure allows two possible interpretations. The homography is thus between redundant/non-redundant occurrences of the forms. Efficiency seeking learners choose the interpretation that the items are redundant (see George, 1971). As well as this of course, *be* and *ed* have other meanings which for the most part are also redundant from an Indonesian point of view.

A questionnaire asked the learners to rank eight topics for reading passages in order of preference. The results from most preferred to least preferred were: jokes, biography, science, war, history, modern literature, love, geography and travel. Other questions revealed that most learners preferred a mixture of topics to all of one type. They wanted material related to their subject of study rather than other types of material, and they were evenly divided between topics about Indonesia and topics about other countries. They requested easy material, information about the pronunciation of words, material to take home, and conversation classes!

The implications

Vocabulary teaching material was urgently needed. Related to this, homographs were a major source of difficulty in reading. These are partly vocabulary problems and partly structural problems as structure can often be used to help differentiate the different meanings, for example, *like* as a verb and *like* as a preposition. It was clear that

exercises teaching the learners to differentiate homographs were essential. The alternative of course is the separation of words which are homographs so that only one meaning of a certain form is taught within one part of the course. The number of structural problems, at the 1,000 word level at least, was small. A course of English grammar covering basic sentence patterns is thus not necessary. For example, a course which teaches the sentence patterns S V O, S be N, S be adj., etc., is spending time on items that do not cause difficulty in reading. 90% of the point covered in one such remedial reading course were not reading problems at all for the learners. Despite the differences between English and Indonesian, learners have little difficulty in reading most of the basic patterns. This is probably due more to the similarity of English and Indonesian, than to the effect of any previous teaching. Only selected points, most of them homographs, needed to be covered in structure teaching. Weinberger (1956) has pointed out the more modest requirements of a reading course compared with other types of courses. What this study showed was that many English structures that do not have a parallel Indonesian counterpart present no difficulty because of redundant nature of the differences. For example, the sentence *John was hungry*, may be translated into Indonesian as *John hungry*. (John lapar.). So, Indonesian has no equivalent word to *was* in this sentence. From an Indonesian point of view, *was* is meaningless and thus redundant. It is probably better for an Indonesian learner to ignore this word while reading because unless the piece of writing is particularly subtle it will have no effect on his understanding of the ideas in the passage. The same is usually true for features of English like third person singular present tense *s*, *a*, the possessive, the past tense suffix, etc.

As a result of this study, these assumptions were made about the nature of reading in English for Indonesian students at this level.

1. The learners can already read Indonesian and thus possess many of the reading skills and a knowledge of many grammatical devices. There is no need to spend much time on these as they will transfer to the reading of English. A well designed mother-tongue or national language reading course would be a valuable prerequisite to an English reading course.
2. Most of the learners' reading problems resulted not from a misunderstanding or a lack of understanding of particular sentence patterns but from an inability to give the appropriate meaning to a particular word. In some cases the required meaning could be determined by an examination of the structure. For example, homographs like *like*, *too*, *-ed*, *going to*, can be distinguished by looking at the sentence structure. In other cases the suitable meaning could be determined by looking at the context, that is, the meaning of the preceding and following parts of the passage. For example, *see* in the sentence *I'll see you tomorrow*, could mean *look at* or *meet* depending on the

context. The similarity between use of the structure and use of the context for determining the meaning of an item is that before deciding on the meaning of a word, the learners should look at its surroundings to see what meaning is most suitable. That is, the learners should interpret rather than decipher. The simple exercises given in the appendix to the article try to encourage this interpretive skill. Group translation of short pieces with accompanying discussion can also do this.

3. Translation while reading is a feature of learners' reading. Rather than try to fight against it, translation should be used to help learners achieve the non-translating skill.

The materials

The first step was the provision of a cheap dictionary as most learners did not own one. At first a 1,000 word English-Indonesian dictionary was produced in stencilled form giving only the meanings used in the course material, usually with only one meaning per word. This was sold very cheaply and was later printed by a local publisher. After being published it was still one-tenth of the cost of any other available dictionary. Later 2,000 and 3,000 word dictionaries were produced cheaply. The 3,000 word dictionary was adapted to all the available word lists for graded readers so that it could be used as a reading dictionary for most available graded reading up to the 2,000 word level. With this dictionary, a reading box became possible as the learners were not dependent on the teacher for the meanings of words. Structure exercises on homographs, the passive, and reference of pronouns preceded the passages. Two examples are given in the appendix to this article. Each passage was followed by multiple-choice questions. The learners had answer keys and graphs. Passages were made at the 500, 1,000, 1,500, and 2,000 word levels.

As well as a reading box, a testing box, a vocabulary box, a puzzle box, and a poem box were made. All were multi-level, self-marking and scoring, and cheap. The material was duplicated and then each sheet of paper was sealed in a plastic bag. In Indonesia, plastic sealing machines are cheap and readily available. An ordinary sheet of paper sealed in a thin plastic bag is far more durable than a glossy sheet of thick cardboard.

The testing box consisted of multiple-choice tests, each containing 50 items using an Indonesian clue and four English words as choices. There were about twelve tests at each level. Every word in each level, including irregular plurals and homographs, were tested. The learners could thus isolate their problem words and learn them. The results were entered on a graph. This box proved to be a popular one. The vocabulary box consisted of self-contained, self-motivating vocabulary teaching exercises dealing with every word in the course (see Nation *E.L.T.* forthcoming). The puzzle box consisted of a variety of self-motivating puzzles designed to give vocabulary and

reading practice (see Nation *Q.C.E.T.A. Journal* forthcoming. The poem box consisted of graded carefully selected poems. The poems all had useful English structures and vocabulary suitable to the various word levels. This box was made because in the questionnaire, literature and poetry were asked for by some learners.

A speed reading course in Indonesian and a speed reading course in English both below the 800 word level were also prepared. The Indonesian speed reading course was found to give an increase in English reading speed of 62.5% as a result of transfer (Bismoko and Nation, 1974).

At present, work is progressing on materials to teach the learners to recognize the spelling changes that occur when a suffix is added to a word. In its present form it consists of a list of examples demonstrating an unstated spelling rule. This is followed by several complex words based on this rule. The learners have to write the root of each word. The material was found to be necessary as several learners considered for example, *hat* to be the root of *hating*.

The final points

A cursory examination of the similarities between Thai and Indonesian suggests that the problems encountered by Thai learners at the same level might not be very different from those facing Indonesian learners of English. It is not difficult for a teacher to use translation to check and see if this is true or not. Finally it is worth noting the differences between the grading of structures in most structurally controlled graded readers and course books, and the lists of easy and difficult structures resulting from this research. For Indonesian learners at least, *It was Friday yesterday* (a pattern which is included in the first level of most structure schemes) is more difficult than the complex sentence *I remember I saw him yesterday*.

Appendix

The Passive

The passive is a group of two words. The first word is *am, is, are, was* or *were* and the next word is a verb. This verb usually has *-ed* on the end. Here are some sentences. Some of them are passive, some are not. P=passive. N=not the passive. Write P or N after each sentence.

1. It is called American English. (P)
2. It is different from English in England. (N)
3. These words were used three hundred years ago.
4. American Indians lived there.
5. Sometimes they joined two old words together.
6. Many new words were taken from other languages.
7. They are very old words.
8. American English is about three hundred years old.
9. The rope is called a lasso.

Find the Correct Meaning

a) like = verb = not hate; enjoy

b) like = pre. = almost the same as

(If *like* has *is, are, etc.* in front of it, it is *b*.)

1. Translation is like a woman. (*b*)
2. He likes me. (*a*)
3. I like playing football.
4. He is like a monkey.
5. There are many words like this.
6. Some people like this.
7. He is like my brother.
8. I don't like him.
9. It means hot, like in hot water.
10. Many people like to listen to it.

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