

## **READER’S THEATER : A SOLUTION TO IMPROVE READING FLUENCY AND READING COMPREHENSION ACHIEVEMENTS OF EFL STUDENTS**

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### **Abstract**

Nowadays, reading is a very essential skill for people since they can obtain information from it. Reading means comprehension since the process of reading is where the readers strive to understand and respond the ideas that are expressed in written text. But at the fact, reading achievement in Indonesia still low based on EF survey in 2013. To solve the problem of Reading Comprehension achievement, the students should focus on Reading Fluency first. Many researchers said that there are a correlation between Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension. They said that fluency is an important part in reading curriculum, but teachers do not understand it. This article will propose a strategy to improve Reading Fluency and Reading comprehension namely Reader’s Theater strategy and also discusses briefly the utilization of Readers Theater strategy to EFL students.

**Keywords:** Reading comprehension, reading fluency, reader’s theater

### **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, reading is a very essential skill for people since they can obtain information from it. The process of reading is where the readers strive to understand and respond the ideas that are expressed in written text (Mraz, Nichols, Caldwell, Beisley, Sargent & Rupley, 2013). The information can be obtained from many sources, such as from the internet, journals, and various types of reports. According to de Debat (2006), reading is a crucial skill for the students who learn English as a foreign language or a second language. It can be said that much knowledge which they need to support their learning can be gained from reading materials.

According to Lakhsmi and Rao (2006), reading without comprehension is not reading at all. Reading means comprehension. Pearce (1994) adds that reading comprehension involves more than successful decoding or fluent oral reading. It means that the Indonesian students who learn English need to have reading comprehension skill. The result of survey of English proficiency in 44 countries by EF (English First) as language teaching institute (2011), showed that Indonesian students was ranked 34<sup>th</sup> out of 44 countries in the world. This means English proficiency of Indonesian students still on the low category. According to Soureshjani and Naseri (2011) who investigated the relationship between self-esteem, proficiency level, and reading ability of Iranian EFL language learners found that learners' proficiency level was more correlated with learner's reading achievement. As Jafari and Shokhpour (2012) explained that students' failures in understanding the English texts are because they are lack of English proficiency, unfamiliarity with the content of the text, and less effective reading strategies use. It can be said that Indonesian students achievement in reading English text still low based on their English proficiency.

To improve students' reading comprehension, the teachers should concern with reading fluency. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), fluency was closely related with comprehension. Reading fluency must increase first before reading comprehension. As Rasinski and Padak (2000) state reading fluency is a significant obstacle to proficient reading for elementary students and many older reader experiencing difficulty in learning to read. Researchers like Reutzel & Hollingsworth (1993) and Zuttel & Rasinski (1991) state that fluency is an important part in reading curriculum, but teachers do not understand it. As mentioned above, researchers also state that most teachers do not have a clear understanding of fluency and what it encompasses, possibly because it is not a central topic on which pre- and inservice teachers are trained. It can be said that the teachers should have a clear understanding about reading fluency of the students. In addition, Rasinski (2006) states that fluency is the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression.

It means that those aspects are the important point in building a fluency of the students.

Repeated reading is the effective approach to teach fluency (Rasinski & Padak, 2000; Samuels, 2002). While repeated reading was effective to gain reading fluency, some students felt that repeated reading had a weakness in meaningful purpose, and thus perceive it as a monotonous task (Clark, 2006). It is caused by students lacking motivation toward repeated reading activities. Rasinski (2003) states that there are more desirable solutions for fluency instruction namely Reader's Theater wherein students are given a script and a specific part, as if they were in a play. RT are closely related to repeated reading since RT is a form of repeated reading. Most of RT scripts are created from pieces of literature text, such as simple fairy tales, short stories, fables, poetry, or prose (Worthy & Prater, 2002).

In this paper, the writer will discuss about one kind of repeated reading strategy to improve Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension namely Reader's Theater (RT) strategy. The writer will explain briefly that RT can be a solution to improve Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension achievements of EFL students based on the previous research and also will explain the way of the utilization of RT strategy to improve Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension achievements of EFL students.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **Reading Fluency and the Aspects that Teachers Should Know**

Fluency is a key point in reading instruction. Egmon et.al (2013) state, fluency is important to the readers because fluent readers are more likely to comprehend and thus are more likely to choose read. Walley (1993) also states that the students who have a good reading fluency can support students to focus on constructing meaning from the text.

Many studies in the past concluded a general definition of reading fluency as the ability to read quickly and automatically (Harris & Hodges, 1995; Logan, 1997).

However, nowadays the definition of fluency is broadened. Reading fluency is not about word calling but also comprehension (Nathan & Stanovich, 1991). The National Reading Panel (2000) defines fluency as the ability to read automatically with proper accuracy, speed, and expression, thus freeing the reader's cognitive abilities, so the meaning of the text can be made. It will propose that fluency have a relationship with comprehension in reading. In line with Caluris (2006) statement that the relationship between fluency and comprehension is reciprocal.

Many aspects which can be measured in reading fluency. Zutell and Rasinski (1991) state that fluency as a proficient oral reading that includes effortless or automatic, correct phrasing, and the use of pitch, stress, and intonation. In their research, Zutell and Rasinski (1991) did not include word recognition and comprehension in their definition, they focused on educators' attention; on the extent to which reading 'sounds' like speaking, that is, how much it conforms to the rhythms, cadences, and flow of oral language.

Because there are many different definitions of reading fluency, Wolf and Katzir-Cohen (2001) conducted a literature review and made some general report of fluency through three theories: the informational-processing theory, the connectionist theory, and the rauding theory. The Informational-processing Theory proposes that fluency is acquired through automaticity. It means that a readers can get a visual stimulus in reading fluency. The kind of stimulus in reading fluency for the readers such as the letters in a word, and with practice and exposure, the features (letters) in the stimuli become a unit. As Wolf and Katzir-Cohen (2001) state, these units accumulate and letter perception becomes increasingly automatic, attention to early visual coding process decreases. The next theory, Connectionist Theory are contrast with the first theory. The second theory emphasizes on "continuous, distributed interaction of phonological, orthographic, syntactic, and semantic processing codes during word recognition" (Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001, p. 75). The Connectionist Theory does not view retrieval mechanisms as the source for coding but acknowledges the importance of other linguistic features, such as prosody. Experts

states that prosody, or intonation and inflection used by readers, is one of the key links to becoming a fluent reader, yet it has become the “unattended bedfellow,” in that researchers and educators pay little attention to it (Dowhower, 1991; Rasinski, 2003). The last theory is according to Carver (1984), the central focus of Rauding Theory is on the relationship between fluency and comprehension. Carver (1984) defines that this theory through three laws. The first law concern on the way how the readers understand a passage at a constant and fluent reading rate. The second law concern on the efficiency of passage comprehension depends on the accuracy and reading rate. The last law concern on the most efficient rate of comprehending. In other words, the rauding theory defines the fluency as the fastest rate at which a reader can efficiently understand complete thoughts in each sentence.

Researchers (Dowhower, 1991; Nathan & Stanovich, 1991) agree with the rauding theory in that automaticity and rate alone do not define reading fluency. In other word, to get a better comprehension in reading must be included with more complete fluency in reading. It could be said that three theories above agree that fluency in reading is necessary and desirable to the readers if the readers want to have a good comprehension.

Wolf and Katzir-Cohen (2001) state, the unsettling conclusion in reading fluency involves every process and subskill in reading. Upon close examination, most of the definitions found in the literature can be synthesized into three components: (a) speed, (b) accuracy, and (c) prosody.

## **1. Method**

### **Accuracy as a Part of Reading Fluency**

The most common measurement of reading accuracy is the percentage of words read correctly during a fluency test. Reading words quickly with the correct pronunciation is a skill that relies heavily on phonics. Edwards and Beckam (2008) conducted an action research project in a classroom consisting of sixteen ninth grade students and found that a high school level, structured phonics program is the most effective way to 38 impact the reading fluency of adolescent at-risk readers. Without accuracy, fluency is impossible; without a solid phonetical foundation accuracy is impossible. The phonics-accuracy-fluency-comprehension relationship is at the heart of the emphasis on phonics in early childhood education. Thus, it should be at the heart of any attempt to remediate reading difficulties in adolescent readers as well. A reader who reads accurately exhibits automaticity, has an excellent grasp of phonics skills for sounding out new words, and does not substitute or omit words while reading.

### **Prosody and the Indicators that Linked to Reading Fluency**

According to Rowen, Biggs, Watkins and Rasinski (2015), Prosody or expressive reading completes the bridge by linking fluency to comprehension. In order to read with appropriate expression a reader has to monitor the meaning of the passage, then Prosody reflects and adds those meaning. It means that Prosody take an important part in relation between reading fluency and reading comprehension. Allington (1983) and Dowhower (1991) also state that Prosody skill has been hypothesized to predict word reading accuracy and comprehension.

Prosody encompasses many oral readingskills, such as expression, intonation, suprasegmental ability, and voice pitch (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008). Whalley and Hansen (2006) state, prosodic cues help segment the speech stream into phrases, words and syllables, inform syntactic structure and emphasise salient information to facilitate understanding. Schreiber (1991) also discussed how prosodic cues segment speech into word chunks to aid reading comprehension. Prosodic reading is as easy to

identify as it is difficult to define. It is often said that it is easy to hear when a student is reading with adequate prosody, even though the term “adequate prosody” is not consistently defined in reading literature. Schreiber (1991) states that there are certain phonological cues that provide relatively consistent indication of certain aspects of phrasal organization, especially the ‘higher order’ units of phrasal structure, such as the subject noun phrase and the predictive verb phrase. These cues are the so-called prosodic features. These features are, of course, overtly present in the speech signal and are hence available as primary and observable cues to structure. Conversely, poor prosody can lead to confusion because phrasal structure is poorly organized or completely misunderstood (Yildirim, Yildiz, Ates, & Ctinkaya, 2009). Dowhower’s (1991) states that foundational work on reading prosody listed his six indicators of prosodic reading:

1. There is a presence or lack of pausal intrusions with valid duration.
2. There is a minimum of seven words per phrase.
3. There is an appropriateness to phrasing (suprasegmental ability).
4. There is a lengthening of final words in phrases.
5. There are terminal intonation contours (pitch changes at punctuation).
6. There is a maximum of one stressed word for every five words read.

Effective prosodic reading can be most simply and accurately defined by breaking down prosodic reading into the specific skills (the major ones) that are needed to produce it, according to reading research. Those skills are absence of pausal intrusions, suprasegmental ability, and appropriate attention to textual features.

### **The Crucial point of Reading Activity; Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension is the crucial point in reading activity. According to Doyle (2004), comprehension is the progressive skill in attaching meaning beginning at the same level and proceeding to attaching meaning to an entire reading selection. It means that the readers should interpret the meaning of the text to get some comprehension. As Royer (2004) states reading comprehension is the process of

understanding and constructing meaning from a piece of the text. Comprehension is revolves around the readers ability in finding and determining main idea and topic sentence of the text. When the readers comprehend the meaning of the text it can be said they are the successful readers. In this case there is an interaction between writer and readers through the text.

Having a prior knowledege of the text could be a ways how the readers get a good comprehension. As Kendeou and Broek (2007) state, a general component in many definitions of comprehension is the interpretation of the information in the text, the use of prior knowledege to interpret this information and, ultimately, the construction of a coherent representation or picture in the reader's mind of what the text is about. Many aspects can build a comprehension of the readers. That is why comprehension are the one of important part in reading activity. The readers would not be able understand the message that would be delivered from author in a text without having comprehension.

Based on the theories, it could be concluded that reading was an active process of getting meaning or information from the text transfered by the writer where is reading comprehension are the important level while reading.

Reading comprehension is considered to occur at four levels of complexity. These levels are often referred to literal level, inferential level, critical level and creative level (Smith, 2003 as cited in Westwood, 2001, p. 21-22)

#### 1. Literal level

In this level, the readers has access to the surface details of the text, and can recall details which have been directly related. The skills in this level are identification and remembering simple or detailed information.



## 2. Interpretative level

In this level, the students go beyond what it is said and read for deeper meaning. They process their ideas based on what is not stated, but implied, by author, including points the author intended the reader to deduce.

## 3. Critical level

At the critical level the reader assesses the good sense of what she/he reading, its clarity, accuracy, and any apparent exaggeration of bias. To read critically is to make judgment about how a text is argued.

## 4. Creative level

In creative reading, the readers try to come up with the new or alternative solutions to those presented by the writer. Creative reading uses divergent thinking skills to go beyond the literal comprehension, interpretative and critical reading.

In the level of EFL student, the main focus in the learning of reading comprehension are on the literal and interpretative level of comprehension. Students were required to find, select, and use the information which means that they had to identify the details of information (literal) and find what actually implied by the writer or what ideas/ points that actually the author wants to share to the readers (intrepretive).

Meanwhile, Burns and Roe (1999) describe the types of questions used in reading comprehension:

1. A *main idea* questions asks for the central them of the selection.
2. A *detail* questions asks for bits of information directly stated in the material.
3. A *sequence* questions requires knowledge of events in their order of occurrence.
4. A *cause-and-effect* question names a cause and asks for its effect or mentions an effect and asks its cause.
5. An *inference* question asks for information that that is implied, but not directly stated, in the passage.
6. A *vocabulary* question asks for the meaning of a word or phrase used in the selection.

The reading comprehension test which was administered in this study covered these six types of comprehension questions.

## **2. Result and Discussion**

The literature on fluency indicated that there is a positive relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension. Rasinski (2003) conducted a study that used a correlational research design to examine that relationship between fluency and comprehension in seventy-seven third grade students and sixty-five fifth grade students in a large Midwestern city. His findings indicated that fluency is a reasonable predictor of comprehension in third and fifth graders. Another study by Stahl and Heubach (2005) indicated that fluency-oriented reading instruction leads to gains in comprehension in second grade students. Using a pretest-posttest design, researchers discovered that students who received fluency-oriented reading instruction made “significantly more than one year’s reading growth in one school year” (Stahl & Heubach, 2005).

Many scholars also state that the most compelling reason to focus instructional efforts on students becoming fluent readers is the strong correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension (Allington, 1983; Jhons, 1993; Samuels, 1988) . According to Hudson, Len and Pullen (2005), each aspects of fluency has a clear connection to text comprehension. Without accurate word reading, the reader will have no access to the author’s intended meaning, and inaccurate word reading can lead to misinterpretations of the text. Poor automaticity in word reading or slow, laborious movement through the text taxes the reader’s capacity to construct an ongoing interpretation of the text. Poor prosody can lead to confusion through inappropriate or meaningless groupings of words or through inappropriate applications of expression.

### **Reader's Theater as a Solution**

Nowadays, integrating literature into English language teaching classroom is a hot topic. One of example are integrating Reader's Theater (RT) into teaching and learning activity. RT is one of technique of theaters plays. Many researcher was conduct a research about this strategy. The result of the studies indicated that this strategy is useful to develop a problem in language skills. One of them in reading skills. Experts concluded that RT had a good impact in reading fluency, comprehension, motivation, and attitude towards reading for the students (Rees, 2005; Graves, 2008; Visser, 2013).

Reader's Theater strategy is developed based on repeated reading (Egmon et.al., 2013). According to Hertzberg (2000), the scripts of RT are adapted from a piece of prose or poetry so they suitable for oral reading. But the other experts state that non-fiction and informational texts can also be used as a valuable source for scripts in RT (Martinez et.al., 1998). It means that it is possible to use any text to be a source to be transcript as RT script.

This strategy is different from traditional theater plays. It is because in playing characters and practicing with their peers, the students repeat the scripts as taking on voice of the characters without costumes or props while rehearsing and performing in public (Keehn, 2008). The students no need to memorize their dialogues, they just read the script in front of class. That is why many experts state that this strategy has a good impact in reading fluency, because from the students preformance, the teachers can measure their fluency when the students read the script.

After being studied and practiced in real reading class for years, RT has been recommended by many educators and scholars (e.g., Tyler and Chard, 2000; Prescott, 2003; Bafile, 2005; Garrett & O'Connor, 2010) to be an effective instructional process by considering the following points.

First, repeated reading required in RT provided students with practice to move decoding to an automatic level (Caluris, 2006). The significant goals of RT are to enhance students' reading skills and comprehension (Tyler & Chard, 2000; Caluris,

2006) as well as build their confidence through repeated reading with a purpose. Therefore, the students must re-read scripts created from grade-level books or stories in the instruction of RT. Young and Rasinski (2009) found that most students were more willing to participate in the practice if knowing that they would perform in front of audiences. Thus, RT offers all students, particularly for those reluctant students, a real reason to read aloud and re-read the same text several times during the rehearsal (Tyler & Chard, 2000; Bafile, 2005).

Second, unlike playing a drama, RT does not require students to memorize the lines of scripts. The emphasis of the presentation of RT is on how students read their lines, and it is meant to motivate students to improve their fluency, enhance their comprehension through multiple rereading of texts, and reduce students' anxiety and pressure of learning.

Third, the teamwork involved in the presentation has also served to motivate students to engage in more attentive readings (Caluris, 2006). Additionally, having the group members' assistance and the repeated reading activity made those struggling students much more willing to read because reading has already become an easier and less stressful task (Tyler & Chard, 2000).

In sum, as Prescott (2003) points out that the benefits of RT could not only develop students' reading fluency, but also enhance confidence and transform reluctant readers into book lovers under the instruction of RT in reading class.

### **Teaching Procedures using Reader's Theater Strategy**

RT strategy was different with the theater traditional, the teachers should pay more attention to use this strategy to improve Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension Achievements of EFL students.

There were 7 steps to practice RT for each script adapted from Wu and Yang (2013). The steps were as follows.

Step 1: Researcher explained about repeated reading aloud and the rules of RT strategy to the students.

Step 2: Researcher read the text of RT material and explained it then the students repeated it after researcher's modeling.

Step 3: Researcher gave an instruction to the students to make a group. Group members were discuss what they want to add to the script based on the text.

Step 4: Researcher collected the script from all groups.

Step 5: Researcher read the script again, and the students repeated it. During this process, the students played different rules to read aloud their scripts.

Step 6: Rehearsal. Each students prepared his/ her lines and make a rehearsal with the group members.

Step 7: The participants performed in front of the audience. After their performance, the researcher gave an instruction to make an open discussion about the performance related to their comprehension about the story.

## **5. Conclusion and Remark**

This paper has attempted to show the way how Reader's Theater strategy can be a solution to improve Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension of EFL students. It suggests some reasons, benefits, recommendation and teaching procedures to use RT as a solution and alternative strategy to improve not only Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension to EFL students. Some researches showed the result of the research about RT, almost of their research indicates that RT can be a solution to EFL students especially to improve their Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension achievements if the teacher use RT strategy right on the track.

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