

## Improving Students' Reading Comprehension Ability Using Task Based Language Teaching at MTs Negeri 1 Yogyakarta

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### **Abstract**

*This study was conducted in response to the fact that the students' reading comprehension ability was much lower than they should have achieved. It was caused by several reasons. One of them was related to the poor teaching learning process. In this study, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) was used to improve the teaching learning process and the students' reading comprehension ability. This research was a Classroom Action Research (CAR) study and it was done in two cycles. Observation and interviews were used to collect data which were then analyzed qualitatively. Students' achievement of daily-test, the students' self-reflection in the form of rating format and the students' achievement of post-tests were used in order to support the data collected. The results of this study indicate that TBLT can improve not only the teaching learning process but also the class 8D of MTs Negeri 1 Yogyakarta students' reading comprehension ability in recount text. It is shown that the students are interested to learn reading and they enjoy the reading teaching learning process using TBLT. The students' average score before the action is 62.81. In the first cycle the mean score is 72.03, meanwhile the mean score in the second cycle is 79.06. It means that there is an improvement of students' scores from cycle to cycle.*

**Keywords:** *Reading Comprehension Ability, Task-Based Language Teaching*

### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini dilakukan untuk menanggapi fakta bahwa kemampuan memahami bacaan siswa lebih rendah dari yang seharusnya mereka capai. Hal ini disebabkan oleh beberapa sebab, salah satunya terkait dengan proses belajar mengajar yang buruk. Dalam penelitian ini, *Taks-Based Language Teaching* (TBLT) digunakan untuk meningkatkan proses belajar mengajar dan kemampuan memahami bacaan siswa. Penelitian ini adalah Penelitian Tindakan Kelas (PTK) dan dilakukan dalam duasiklus. Observasi dan wawancara digunakan untuk mengumpulkan informasi yang kemudian diolah secara kualitatif. Hasil tes harian siswa, rating format siswa, dan hasil postes digunakan untuk mendukung data kualitatif yang diperoleh. Hasil penelitian mengindikasikan bahwa TBLT tidak hanya dapat meningkatkan proses belajar mengajar namun juga kemampuan siswa kelas 8D di MTs Negeri 1 Yogyakarta dalam memahami bacaan *recount*. Terlihat bahwa siswa tertarik untuk

belajar membaca dan mereka menikmati proses belajar mengajar membaca menggunakan TBLT. Nilai rata-rata siswa sebelum penelitian adalah 62.81, sedangkan nilai rata-rata postes siswa pada siklus pertama meningkat menjadi 72.03, dan pada postes siklus kedua menjadi 79.06. Ini berarti ada peningkatan nilai rata-rata siswa dari siklus ke siklus.

**Kata Kunci:** *Kemampuan Memahami Bacaan, Task-Based Language Teaching*

## **Introduction**

One of the receptive skills in learning English language, which should be focused on, is the reading comprehension since reading plays an important role in language learning and acquisition. Reading comprehension is also considered as the real core for reading process. It assumes that comprehension is the peak of the reading skills and the bases for all reading processes. Therefore, teaching students to read with a good comprehension must be teachers' highest priority. Furthermore, the main aim of teaching reading in junior high schools is to enable students to comprehend various reading texts.

Realizing the high importance of reading comprehension ability, it is very important to find and use appropriate instructional methods, materials, activities, media, and other requirements that will help the learners improve their reading comprehension ability. In the view of this, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) seems to match the appropriate method to be used. TBLT is one of the teaching learning methods that its focus is put on the learners. Through TBLT, learners have the opportunity to work more autonomously and build their vocabulary and grammar. TBLT provides learners the opportunity in depth investigations of worthy knowledge. Therefore, my collaborator and I chose Task-based Language Teaching to facilitate the students with reading skills. Through this method, the students were offered opportunities to learn and use language by doing some tasks.

In an attempt to improve the students' reading comprehension ability, this study was guided by some research questions, i.e.: (1) what are the classroom steps of TBLT in teaching learning reading? (2) how do the students participate in the teaching learning process applying TBLT from the beginning to the closing? (3) what is the students' engagement improvement in the teaching learning process applying TBLT? and (4) what is the students' improvement in their reading comprehension achievement after the teaching learning process applying TBLT?

This research is expected to give some contributions to many parties. For students, the result of this research can help them to improve their ability in speaking skill. Besides, it hopefully may help them to improve their participation and motivation in the teaching and learning process. For teachers, they can improve the teaching learning process after reading the result of this research. They can also compare the results of this research with situation they have already met before.

Moreillon (2007, p.10) defines reading as using printed information and visual information to get meaning or the message conveyed in a text. In addition,

Burt et al. (2003, p.33) state that reading is essentially the process of getting information from the written language. Moreover, Smith (2004, p.2) defines reading as making sense of something and then interpreting it. Moreover, Silberstein (1994, p.12) states that reading is a complex information processing skill in which the reader interacts with text in order to (re) create meaningful discourse.

I conclude that reading is a process of thinking toward the written text to create meaning or to get the meaning conveyed. In brief, it can be stated that reading involves a complex process. It requires the analysis, coordination, and interpretation of a variety of sources of information. Readers should be able to relate a text their experiences in the real world, to understand the words in the text by relating it with the knowledge possessed by the readers and to link the new information in the text with their background knowledge.

In the process of reading, comprehending the content of the written texts is the priority. In other words, comprehension is the essence of reading (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p.277). Raising students' awareness of main ideas in a text and exploring the organization of a text are essential for good comprehension, then. In short, reading comprehension is the ability to construct meaning from a given written text. O'Shea on Klinger, et al. (2007, p.2) added that reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning by coordinating a number of complex processes.

Supporting the idea, Pang et al. (2003, p.14) explain about the comprehension. They say that comprehension is the process of deriving meaning from connected text. It involves word knowledge (vocabulary) as well as thinking and reasoning. Therefore, comprehension is not a passive process, but an active one. The reader actively engages with the text to construct meaning. This active engagement includes making use of prior knowledge. It involves drawing inferences from the words and expressions that a writer uses to communicate information, ideas and viewpoints.

### **Reading Skills for MTs Students**

In this study, I adapt some of theory of Brown (2001, p.307) and the theory of Mikulecky and Jeffries (1996, p.13-16). The comprehension skills needed by the MTs students and then applied in this study are (a) detecting culturally specific references and interpret them in a context of the appropriate cultural schemata; (b) developing and using a battery of reading strategies such as scanning and skimming, detecting discourse markers, guessing the meaning of words from context, and activating schemata for the interpretation of texts; (c) recognize the communicative functions of written texts, according to form and purpose; (d) inferring context that is not explicit by using background knowledge; (e) inferring links and connections between events, ideas, etc., deducing cause and effects, and detecting such relation as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization and exemplification.

## **Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)**

### **1. Characteristics of TBLT**

Nunan outlines five characteristics of a task-based approach to language learning. They are: 1) an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, 2) the introduction of authentic texts (teaching materials) into the learning situation, 3) the provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language, but also on the learning process itself, 4) an enhancement of the learner's own personal experience as important contributing elements to classroom learning, and 5) an attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom. Similar with Nunan, Willis (1996, p.28) says that task is an activity that necessarily involves language. Furthermore, Willis defines the term task as those activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome.

### **2. Teacher's and Learners' Role in TBLT**

Nunan (1989, p.79) states that role refers to the part that learners and teachers are expected to play in carrying out learning tasks as well as the social and interpersonal relationships between the participants. Furthermore, learner's roles are closely related to the functions and status of the teacher. Learner roles are closely related to the functions and status of the teacher. Giving the learners a different role, such as greater initiative in the classroom, requires the teacher to adopt a different role. The teacher is no longer a passive recipient and implementer of other people's syllabus and methods but an active creator of his or her own materials, classroom activities and so on.

In addition, according to Richards and Rodgers in Nunan (1989, p.84), the teacher roles are related to the following issues in the communicative classroom. The first is the types of function of teachers are expected to fulfill, the second is the degree of control the teacher has over the learning takes place, the third is the degree to which the teacher is responsible for content, and the fourth is the interactional patterns that develop between the teacher and the learners. As to me, the teacher should first be the facilitator of the reading material and the designer of the task. Second, the teacher should be the observer and guide. Learners may be confused about what they should do and how they can read during the task, so the teacher should monitor the reading process of learners so as to give the timely guidance, and observe carefully at the performance of learners so as to praise them or give them the suggestion of improvement. Finally, the teacher should be a listener and learner. Learners are usually creative, so the teacher should listen to their opinions, exchange his/her idea with them and maybe he/she could learn from them, which is called that teaching benefits teachers as well as learners.

In short, in a task-based language teaching class, learners play central role. Reading tasks have specific goals, detailed procedures and methods for students to follow. It can be said that task-based language teaching is both

student-centered and task-based. In the class where students are provided with plenty of chance to be engaged in activities, the teacher is more like a patient listener rather than a talkative speaker. The goals of such reading activities are for students to explore and experience language and develop reading skills. In task-based language teaching class, the teacher designs tasks from different angles and different forms, which evoke students' interest, and organizes lessons in such a way that students can carry out the reading tasks with quality and efficiency. Furthermore, reading, in my point of view, is not a boring work. It is an active process, during which the reader tries to understand the meaning of a given text. With the guidance of the teacher, learners can understand the meaning more effectively and actively.

### 3. The Application of TBLT in Reading Class

TBLT is primarily based on both meaning-focused and grammar-based teaching. To make the students focus on the target language depends on the stages done. Willis cited in Harmer (2007, p.71) suggests a set of stages to initiate task-based language teaching in which there are three important stages to do: (1) Pre-task: the students are introduced to the topic and the task. (2) Task-cycle: task – students in groups carry out the task; planning – each group prepares how to report their completion of the task to the class; reporting – students report their completion of the task. (3) Pre-Task/Language focus: analysis – students analyze and assess the completion of the tasks by other groups; practice – students practice the language difficulties under the direction of the teacher, the teacher and the students discuss the specific language features.

The three-step process then can be modified within a creative one to adjust the learning objectives. Here is a suggested step I adapted from Willis and Willis (2007, p.34-40).

- a. Obtain some interesting appropriate texts from applicable sources. In this step, the background schemata of the students become my consideration in selecting the text, whether or not the topic appears appealing.
- b. Report the result. After a well-prepared report has been done, the students begin to present the story to the class and they compare with other groups' to find out the differences idea among the groups.
- c. Do a reading session. In this step, the students will compare their speculation about the text to the complete version of the story.
- d. Focus on grammar. The goal of Task-based Language Teaching in reading class is not only on meaning focused teaching, but also on form focus teaching. In this step, I would give a number of feedbacks to the learners' language during the presentation.
- e. Write a text. This step allowed the students worked individually. Writing the text in the final step of TBLT activities in this study was aimed to check the students' reading comprehension ability through arranging the jumbled sentences, completing the corrupted paragraph or summarizing.

Writing was done in order to strengthen the students' reading comprehension.

### **Solutions to Classroom Problems**

Reviewing the theories stated before, this action research study was developed accordingly. The Task-based Language Teaching will be applied to compensate the lack of teaching strategies. Sequences of tasks will be given to the students to accommodate the interesting practice of reading through TBLT. Moreover, Willis (1996) states that there are certain principles that can help teachers select and device useful classroom activities for stimulating students' learning. In order to improve students' comprehension ability, an effort of action research was held through applying TBLT.

This research tries to make an effort to improve the students' reading comprehension ability in the English teaching-learning process through action research. The effort is conducted collaboratively by researcher and the English teacher and will be divided into two steps; reconnaissance and action. Reconnaissance is the step of observing, identifying, classifying and categorizing the problems. Action is the step of planning, implementing, evaluating and reflecting the action.

### **Method**

The study was classroom action research and done in two cycles. This classroom action research design adapted the action research procedure suggested by Elliot in Hopkins (2008, p.52) which involved two main steps in a cycle research, those were reconnaissance and action. The action itself consisted of planning, implementation, evaluation, and reflection. The stages of the action research were started with reconnaissance. In this stage, information was collected concerning with the English teaching and learning process. After identifying the existing problems, the research concern was determined. The next stage was planning. It is a stage to plan the improvement and to cover some points regarding what the collaborator and I can do to solve the problems. Based on the results of the reconnaissance, some lesson plans, materials and the required instruments were prepared. Acting is the next step. In this stage, the lesson plans were implemented in the class. The teaching learning activities of each cycle were conducted according to the steps in TBLT. At the end of each cycle, there was a post-test.

The next stage was observing. In this stage, all events that happened during the teaching leaning process of the action in each cycle were observed, monitored and recorded. All students' activities were recorded in the form of field notes. The next stage was reflecting. The descriptive records during the teaching learning process were reflected. In this stage, the process and the results of the implementation of project-based learning in English teaching learning process were evaluated.

The data of each step of TBLT were analyzed, and be used to determine the actions of the next cycle. The last stage was revising the plan. The reflection of the first cycle was used as the basis to revise the actions on the second cycle. In this action research, there were standards or criteria to stop the cycle. The cycle was stopped when the students were able to fulfill the criteria.

## Results and Discussions

The situation prior to the action was portrayed trough a preliminary study done before the collaborator and I conducted this classroom action research study. I chose class 8D, one of the female classes, since the students in this class got the lowest English score among the other eighth graders. The students of this class got the lowest average score of daily tests, especially for recount text, for four reading texts among other students of the same grade taught by Mr. Jamhari, the collaborator. The collaborator and I also decided to take recount texts since the result of the test of this genre was the worst one.

The data show that the students' average score for descriptive text test was 70.98, for short message test was 75.35, for notice test was 75.96, and the average score for recount text test was 67.81. The mean score of two short functional texts tests, i.e. short message and notice had already passed over the school standard or the criterion of minimum competence (*Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal - KKM*). However, the results of the test for the genre, i.e. descriptive and recount texts show that those had not achieved the school standard, and the recount text was the worst.

Based on the results of the observation of the teaching learning process and the field note I got, the teacher as my collaborator and I concluded some existing problems. They were as follows. The steps of the teaching learning process did not provide good characteristics of teaching learning reading, the teaching learning activities were not interesting and monotonous; they made the students get bored, mentally most of the students were not ready to learn, most of them were passive in doing the task; they were noisy in doing things not related to the task, they had limited vocabulary for comprehending the recount texts, they easily gave up; they had low motivation in building their vocabulary, most of them did not bring their dictionaries, most of them got bored in the teaching learning process; they made jokes and chatted each other, they had limited grammar knowledge; they could not understand the use of 'past form verbs' and 'past form be', and the students' reading comprehension ability was low.

Considering the priority and the feasibility of the problems to be solved, the collaborator and I made a list of solvable problems. They were formulated as follows: (1) the steps of the teaching learning process did not provide characteristics of good teaching learning reading, (2) the teaching learning activities were not interesting and monotonous; they made the students get bored, (3) the students had not enough vocabulary as needed for comprehending the recount texts, (4) the students had not enough grammar knowledge as needed;

they did not master the use of 'past form verbs' and 'past form be' and the 'connectors', and (5) the students' reading comprehension ability was low. Most of their daily test scores did not reach the *KKM*.

After formulating the problems, the collaborator and I discussed and decided some actions improve the process of teaching learning reading in order reach the final goal of the action, i.e. to improve students' reading comprehension ability. A teaching method that can improve the students' reading comprehension ability and give good teaching learning process for the students was needed. This method should also give the students chances to develop their vocabularies and grammar knowledge. The method that was used in this action research was Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT). We agreed to apply TBLT in teaching reading. We decided to apply TBLT for some reasons. They are (1) the focus of TBLT is on the process rather than on the product. The focus of TBLT on the process will help the students become more focus and engaged on the activities during the teaching learning process since there is no burden for the students to produce something after the process, (2) activities and tasks in TBLT can be either those that learners might need to achieve in real life or those that have a pedagogical purpose specific to the classroom. It will be easier for the teacher to lead the students to a topic for it is related to the students' real life which in turn wakes the students' background of knowledge needed to comprehend the reading texts, (3) activities and tasks in TBLT are sequenced according to the level of difficulty. It means that the students will get the comprehensible input during the teaching learning process. Furthermore, the activities and tasks in TBLT will not make the students easily give up since they are sequenced according to the level of difficulty. It means the sequences will help the students to be more confidence because unconsciously, the students will feel that they can do the tasks, (4) the difficulty of a task in TBLT depends on a range of factors including the previous experience of the learners, the complexity of the task, and the language required to undertake the task (Feez in Richard and Rodgers, 2001: 224).

It is believed then that the students' limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge will improve since TBLT gave a chance for the students to explore their vocabularies and grammar knowledge.

In relation to the implementation of Task-based language Teaching or TBLT in the effort of improving the process of teaching and learning reading at class 8B of MTs Negeri 1 Yogyakarta, the students were interested in doing the tasks since they were studying the texts in the form of recount with the topics related to the real life. The steps of teaching learning process using TBLT enabled the students to participate actively in it.

In addition, the Basic Competence for that standard of competence is the students should be able to respond accurately, smoothly, and in accepted ways the meaning and the rhetorical steps on simple short essay in the form of recount. It means that the process of teaching reading in this action research was planned, done and supervised was in line with the rules in the Standard of Process.



On the other hand, the materials of the teaching instructions were in line with the Standard of Content and the aim of the teaching process was in line with the KI and *KD* of Curriculum 2013. The Standard of Process stipulates that the instructions need focus on the students, to be interactive, interesting, challenging, and motivating. In turn, it should lead the students to participate actively in the teaching learning process. Therefore, the collaborator and I used TBLT in this research since it was in line with the standard.

During the teaching learning process, the students were challenged to be diligent in opening and using the dictionary especially when they were doing the tasks in the Pre-Task phase. In addition, the students were able to improve their vocabulary mastery after doing the tasks. They were also able to increase their grammar mastery though in one time they asked me to explain the *Grammar Review*. Those responds were in line with what Harmer (2007) says that TBLT is primarily based on both meaning focused and grammar-based teaching.

It can also be said that TBLT is student-centered. I provided plenty of chance for the students to be engaged in the teaching learning process. I placed myself as a patient listener rather than a talkative speaker. The goals of the reading tasks I gave to the students were for them to explore and experience language and develop reading skills. The students actively tried to understand the meaning of given texts with my guidance. They were able to improve their reading comprehension ability, they could learn to understand the meaning of the texts more effectively and actively. When the steps of TBLT were implemented, the situation of teaching learning process was good. Both of the students' engagement in the teaching learning process and the students' achievement in the tests improved.

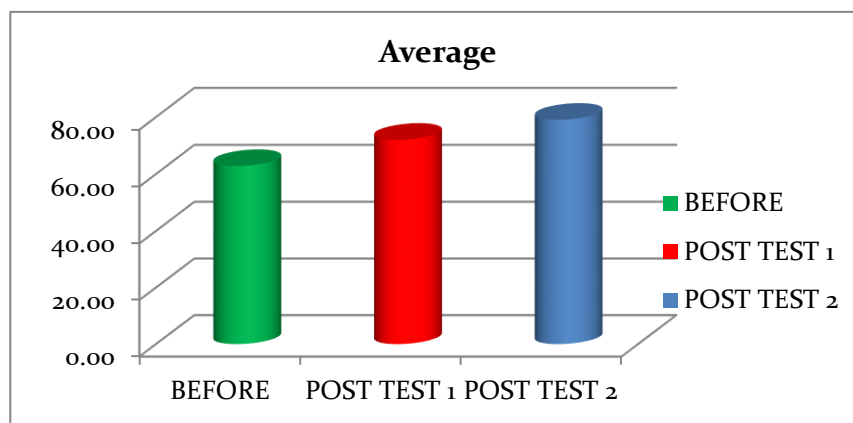


Figure 1. The Progress Result of Students' Reading Comprehension Scores

The chart of the progress result of the students' reading comprehension scores above shows that the students' average scores in each test improved. The average of students' scores before the action was 62.81, the average of students' scores of Post-Test 1 was 72.03, and the average of students' scores of Post-Test 2 was 79.06.

### **The Classroom Steps of TBLT in Teaching Learning Reading**

There were five steps of the TBLT in the reading teaching learning process that I adopted from Willis and Willis (2007, p.34-40). Then I adapted the steps in order to adjust the learner needs. The steps of the reading teaching learning process in the implementation of this study were: a) Introducing the topic and obtain some interesting appropriate vocabularies, pictures and texts from applicable sources related to the topic, b) doing a reading session, c) preparing for the report in groups, c) reporting the result, d) focusing on grammar, and e) writing a text.

It can be concluded that the initial steps of TBLT (Pre-Task phase) also gave the students chance to explore their background knowledge and the vocabularies needed to comprehend the texts. The tasks in this step made the students' vocabulary mastery increased. In the next step, the students had tasks that helped them to improve their grammar mastery so that the students became easier in comprehending the texts given. The tasks followed after that (Task-Cycle) provided a lot of chances to the students to train their reading comprehension ability. There were some texts and questions followed the texts to be done by the students both in groups, in pairs, or individually.

### **The students' participation during the teaching learning process**

There were some improvements of engagement reached by the students in the teaching learning process applying TBLT. First, the students were not actively engaged in the teaching learning process before the actions, however they were actively engaged in the teaching learning process during the actions. During the teaching learning process before the actions, the students did not enjoy doing the tasks, but the students enjoyed doing the tasks during in the teaching learning process during the actions. Third, the students were not ready to learn at the initial meeting of the action, but they were ready to follow the teaching learning process at the next meetings. Fourth, the students did not bring their dictionaries at the initial meeting of the action, however they brought the dictionary or 'word piggy bank' in the next meetings. Finally, some students did not want to work in groups at initial meetings, fortunately, they wanted to work in groups, in pairs, or individually like what I ordered.

### **The students' improvement in their reading comprehension achievement after the teaching learning process applying TBLT**

The results of this classroom action research showed that TBLT could improve not only the teaching learning process of reading but also the students' reading comprehension ability in class 8D of MTs Negeri 1 Yogyakarta in the academic year 2016/2017. There was a progress on the results of the tests. The average of the students' reading scores on 'recount' before the action was 62.81. There were only 6 students who got scores above the *KKM* and 10 students who got the equal scores to *KKM*. After they had studied the texts through the steps of

TBLT, the students got 70.03 for the average score of the Post-Test 1. There were 10 students who achieved scores above the *KKM* and 9 students who achieved equal scores to *KKM*. It was better than that before the action. The students even got better scores in the Post-Test 2. They got 79.06 for the average score of Post-Test 2. There were 22 students who achieved the scores above the school standards of *KKM*, and 7 students who got the equal scores to *KKM*. There were only 3 students left with scores below the *KKM*. Based on the result of the research in the previous chapter, it can be concluded that the use of TBLT is able to improve the students' engagement in the teaching learning process, their vocabulary and grammar mastery, and finally their reading comprehension ability.

### Conclusion

In order to improve the students' reading comprehension ability in class 8D of MTs Negeri 1 Yogyakarta in the academic year of 2016/2017, I implemented classroom action research by applying Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) in the process of teaching learning. I conducted preliminary study before to the research itself in order to dig up all information I needed and to understand the teaching learning process of reading. During the preliminary study, I took a part as the observer while the collaborator took his own role as the teacher. The preliminary study included observing the teaching learning process of reading done by the collaborator and gaining and analyzing the students' scores in reading.

During the implementation, I worked collaboratively with an English teacher. The English teacher took a role as an observer and I took the role as the practitioner, the researcher, or the teacher. The research was conducted in two cycles and each cycle consisted of five meetings, four meetings for the teaching learning processes and one meeting for the post-test. There were eight minutes available in every meeting. The collaborator and I decided to give different reading topic for different cycle though the text type was the same. The topic of the first cycle was 'Holiday to Famous Places' and for the second one was 'Indonesian National Heroes'. I conducted the post-test at the end of every cycle in order to identify the achievement improvement of the students' reading comprehension ability. On the other hand, the observation was done by the collaborator in order to gather information about the whole activities during the teaching learning process using TBLT.

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