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Improving Reading Comprehension Skills of International Elementary School Students through Blended Learning

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the improvement of elementary school students' reading comprehension skills through blended learning. The population in this study was all fifth grade students of an international school in Serpong, Tangerang. Using a purposive sampling technique, in total 20 foreign students were involved as a sample in this study. Data were collected using tests and observations and then analyzed using the N-Gain test to see the improvement of students' reading comprehension skills. Descriptive analysis was also performed to see students' activities during the learning process. The results showed that the average students' scores on pre-test and post-test increased by 28 points with an average gain of n-gain of 0.84 in a high category. During the learning process, students also looked happy and enthusiastic in learning Indonesian. Learning Indonesian through blended learning was shown to improve the reading comprehension skills of foreign students. Therefore, blended learning can be used an alternative for solving the problem of limited time and the amount of materials that must be learned, thus giving a positive impact on the reading comprehension skills of foreign students learning Indonesian.

Keywords: *blended learning, reading comprehension, Indonesian, foreign students.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan peningkatan keterampilan membaca pemahaman siswa sekolah dasar melalui pembelajaran *blended learning*. Populasi dalam penelitian ini adalah seluruh siswa kelas lima suatu sekolah internasional di Serpong, Tangerang. Sementara itu, teknik pengambilan sampel yang digunakan adalah *purposive sampling* dengan jumlah sampel sebanyak 20 siswa asing. Metode pengumpulan data didasarkan pada tes dan observasi. Data hasil penelitian kemudian dianalisis menggunakan uji N-Gain untuk melihat peningkatan

keterampilan membaca pemahaman siswa dan analisis deskriptif untuk melihat aktivitas siswa selama proses pembelajaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rata-rata pre-test dan post-test meningkat 28 poin dengan perolehan rata-rata n-gain sebesar 0,84 dengan kategori tinggi. Selain itu, selama proses pembelajaran siswa juga terlihat senang dan antusias dalam belajar bahasa Indonesia. Hal berarti bahwa pembelajaran dengan *blended learning* dapat meningkatkan keterampilan membaca pemahaman siswa asing dalam belajar bahasa Indonesia. Oleh karena itu, pembelajaran dengan *blended learning* dapat menjadi alternatif dalam menjawab masalah terbatasnya waktu dan banyaknya materi yang harus dipelajari sehingga berdampak pada keterampilan membaca pemahaman siswa asing dalam belajar bahasa Indonesia.

Kata kunci: *blended learning, pemahaman membaca, bahasa Indonesia, siswa asing.*

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, students' literacy skills are closely related to the demands of reading skills, which lead to the ability to understand information analytically, critically, and creatively. However, learning in schools lacks this realization. The results of policy research funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture showed that children's reading skills in Indonesia were relatively low (Faizah et al., 2016). In this case, the results of the study signified that the Indonesian language proficiency of elementary school students was placed in a moderate to low category. On that basis, the students' achievement on reading skills was reported to be low (Kurniawan & Slamet, 2016). Even though, reading has an important role in life.

Reading skills are unique, and act as the main communication tool for human life. Such skills also play an essential role in the development of science (Iskandarwassid & Sunendar, 2011); (Danče, 2010). On the other hand, reading skills become unique because not everyone can use the skills to promote oneself or internalize it as a culture. Not surprisingly, reading skills function as the main communication tool and become an effective and efficient medium of communication. Likewise, reading plays an important role in the development of science, because the largest percentage of knowledge transfer comes from reading (Salaberry, 2001). Over recent decades, the results of research have shown that someone who has reading skills will be able to think logically, because reading has a logical and linguistic element (Murtono, 2015); (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Stouffer, 2016).

Meanwhile, it is not easy for elementary school students in general to well understand the contents of reading. According to Fuzidri (2014), the three problems that often arise in students' learning to read are as follows: 1) there is a lack of student interest, motivation and seriousness; 2) the reading material used by the teacher is less attractive so it does not foster

student interest; 3) the learning model used by the teacher is less effective, less interesting, and does not motivate students to read.

The problems in reading comprehension are also experienced by students in learning a second language. Foreign students studying Indonesian, abbreviated as BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing), experience the same problems in reading comprehension. It is because second language learning is not a simple process. As foreign students learn Indonesian in Indonesia, the learning situation becomes a second language learning situation. Whereas if their learning of Indonesian is done in their own country, the learning situation becomes a foreign language learning situation (Muliastuti, 2017). Foreign students who learn Indonesian in Indonesia will receive various inputs from the Indonesian community. For them, the native speaker environment is very important for the development of these language skills (Patricia & Amanto, 2010).

Basically, the process of acquiring first language (L1) and second language (L2) is not substantially different. It involves three competencies, namely semantic competence, syntactic competence, and phonological competence. These three competencies are the core of linguistic competencies (Endorat, 2014). Children who learn a second language at the age of 6 years get benefit in the aspect of phonology. They can speak the words of the second language almost the same to native speakers. However, grammatical errors still occur when they create sentences with a more complex structure. While adults tend to get benefit in morphological and syntactic aspects (Suyitno, 2007).

The second language will be complicated to learn if the learner does not have adequate supporting factors. As mentioned by Chaer (2009), there are five determinant factors in second language learning, namely: a) motivation; b) age; c) formal presentation; d) first language; e) environment. Children in the age of two to 13 years will find it easier to learn a second language than children whose age is above 13 years. Among those think that children have advantages in learning because of the theory of CPH (Critical Period Hypothesis). The argument is that children are superior to adults in second language learning because their brains are still flexible (Lenneberg, 1967).

On the other hand, the lack of word recognition and word meaning also becomes a problem in reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is closely related to word recognition, word meaning, phonetic analysis and structure. When word recognition skills are not developed, problems arise in reading comprehension (Kodan, 2017). Based on the data from observations and interviews with teachers and principals in international schools in Jakarta and Bekasi, it was found that BIPA students had a problem in the learning to read. A

lack of word recognition and word meaning makes it difficult for students to understand reading texts.

Reading is an interactive activity to pick and understand the meanings contained in written materials. Rahim (2019) emphasized that the most effective learning process can be done through reading activities. Readers usually use background knowledge, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, experience with texts, and other strategies to help them understand written texts. As the literature indicates, reading is the introduction of symbols of written language, a stimulus that helps the process of memorizing what is read, to build an understanding through the acquisition of experience (Smith & Feng, 2018). In this regard, it can be interpreted that the purpose of reading is to gain understanding as well as to develop the knowledge of the reader (Kozak, 2011).

In the report of “Becoming a Nation of Readers” in 1985, Anderson (1985) proposed five guiding principles to success in reading, as follows (1) reading is a constructive process, (2) reading must be smooth, (3) reading must be strategic, (4) reading requires motivation, and (5) reading is a developing skill. In another view, the results of the study in 2016 revised the definition of reading to literacy and reformulated the principles in response to empirical theories in the intervening years related to the process and context of reading. In the contemporary principles, (1) literacy is a constructive, integrative, and critical process in social practice; (2) reading fluently is formed by language processes and contexts; (3) literacy is strategic and disciplined; (4) literacy requires motivation and involvement; and (5) literacy is a series of developments in practice (Frankel, Becker, Rowe & Pearson, 2016).

Reading comprehension is a complex interaction between automatic and strategic cognitive processes that allows the reader to create a mental representation of the text (Turkeltaub, Flowers, Zeffiro, Eden, & Gareau, 2003). In this case, understanding depends not only on the characteristics of the reader, such as prior knowledge and working memory, but also on language processes, such as basic reading skills, elaboration, vocabulary, sensitivity to text structure, irregularities, and motivation. It also requires the effective use of strategic processes, such as monitoring metacognition and understanding. If the readers are adept in their understanding skills, they can progress efficiently from the learning stage of reading until the final goal of reading (Yovanoff, Duesbery, Alonzo, & Tindal, 2005).

In line with the idea, Somadayo (2011) revealed that reading comprehension is a complex intellectual process that includes two primary abilities, the mastery of word meanings and the ability to think about verbal concepts. In this context, this opinion views that reading comprehension simultaneously occurs in a two-way concentration in the reader's

mind. In the reading activities, the readers actively respond through revealing the sound of writing and the language used by the author. For this reason, they are required to express the meaning in the text conveyed by the author. By seeing the important role of reading skills in elementary school students and in order to make learning to read fun, blended learning can be chosen as an alternative to second language learning. The results of research involving elementary school students in Jakarta showed that there was a high interest in learning and improving critical thinking skills using flipped class as a model of blended learning (Rombot, Ariesta, & Doringin, 2018).

Studies on reading comprehension have been conducted by several researchers. It is because reading comprehension is seen to be influential to other subjects in elementary school. Kavani & Amjadiparvar (2018) conducted research using the experimental method and the Mancova test to see the relationship between strategy-based instruction (SBI) and children's reading comprehension and motivation. The results of data analysis revealed that SBI significantly influenced the reading comprehension, motivation, and self-regulation (SR) of foreign language students. In another study, 378 elementary school students in grade 3-5 were given narrative and expository texts and their reading comprehension was assessed. This study indicated that students found difficulties in understanding the texts (Cunha & Capellini, 2014). The results of research showed that learning to understand the contents of reading texts is difficult. Thus, it is important to improve reading comprehension skills especially at the level of basic education.

In this study, to improve reading comprehension skills in second language learning, researchers used a blended learning approach. Blended learning is a merging of learning, or hybrid learning (Poon, 2013). Blended learning integrates a face-to-face teaching and learning process and the use of information and communication technology (ICT). Blended learning combines direct instruction, indirect instruction, collaborative teaching, learning with the support of an individual computer/gadget (Lalima & Dangwal, 2017). As explained by Bonk & Graham (2014), blended learning is a combination of two histories of teaching and learning models including traditional learning systems and learning dissemination systems, which emphasize the role of computer-based technology centers in blended learning. Because of its blended nature, students have the opportunity to interact in discussions with other teachers and students. It also offers an enjoyable learning environment suiting to the characteristics of digital generation. In this regard, learning through a blended learning model can develop student discipline, responsibility, and learning motivation through appropriate planning (Lalima & Dangwal, 2017). Based on the problems described, this study aims to explore how

blended learning can improve reading comprehension skills of the fifth-grade international elementary school students and their reading interest. This research is expected to give insights into an appropriate blended learning model for language learning in the elementary school settings.

METHODS

This experimental research employed a pre-experimental design. The population of this study was the fifth-grade students at international elementary school in Serpong, Tangerang. Using a purposive sampling technique, twenty students were selected as a sample in this study. The data were collected using tests and observations. Tests were used to measure the students' ability in understanding the contents of reading. Assessment indicators include the students' ability in interpreting words and sentences and answering questions according to the reading texts. Meanwhile, observations were conducted to find out the students' learning activities in the classroom. A likert scale was employed as an instrument to assess the students' learning motivation and their pleasure of learning Indonesian.

In addition, the normalized gain analysis was used to assess the improvement of students' learning outcomes (Sudjana, 2016). For each participant, the improvement from pretest to posttest was calculated through subtracting each person's pretest score from his or her posttest score. The actual gain score is the gain score obtained by the students, while the maximum gain score is the highest gain score that can be obtained by them. Meanwhile, the data observations of students' learning activities were analyzed using the descriptive analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the pre-test and post-test of the students' learning outcomes, the scores were calculated to determine their normalized gain. The normalized gain data from the experimental class are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Recapitulation of Normalized N-Gain

No	Score Pre Test	Qualification Posttest	Normalized Gain	Criteria
1	60	90	0,75	High
2	80	100	1.00	High
3	70	100	1,00	High
4	60	85	0,63	Moderate
5	80	100	1,00	High
6	50	85	0,70	Moderate
7	50	90	0,80	High

8	60	90	0,75	High
9	60	85	0,63	Moderate
10	70	100	1,00	High
11	50	85	0,75	Moderate
12	60	85	0,63	Moderate
13	60	90	0,75	High
14	80	100	1,00	High
15	80	100	1,00	High
16	70	100	1,00	High
17	60	90	0,75	High
18	80	100	1,00	High
19	50	85	0,70	Moderate
20	80	100	1,00	High

Based on the results of the normalized gain in table 1, the researcher can see the n-score acquisition criteria, as presented in Diagram 1.

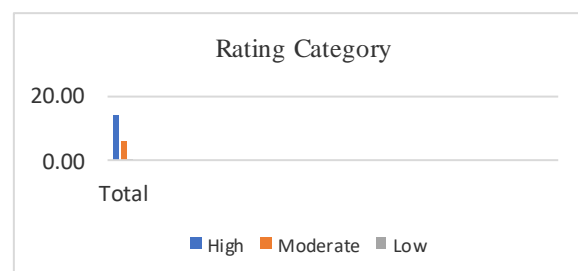


Diagram 1. Rating Category Normalized Gain

Based on the table 1 and diagram 1, there are two categories of the n-gain value. A total of six students obtained a gain score range of $0.70 \geq g > 0.30$ (a moderate category) and as many as 14 students received a gain score range of $1.0 \geq g > 0.70$ (a high category). This proves that blended learning can improve reading comprehension skills with high criteria. Through blended learning, students can read the reading text repeatedly both online and offline.

Assessment of learning outcomes is carried out based on the results of the students' pre-test and post-test. It is indicated that there is a percentage increase on the students' completeness in the competence to understand the contents of blended learning. A total of 20 students did not complete the answer of pre-test questions. Students are considered to complete the lesson if the score obtained reaches ≥ 81 according to the minimum completeness criteria in the school. The average pre-test score of students was 65.5 with a 0% level of completeness. In this context, students' scores did not reach the comprehension on the

contents of the reading texts tested. At the other part, the post-test showed that there was an increase on the completeness of grades. In this area, all students are completed. Their average post-test score is 93. The students' percentage of completeness in the post-test is 100% with the average acquisition of n-gain value of 0.84 with a high category. This proves that in learning to understand reading texts, there is an improvement of the students' ability in interpreting sentences and understanding new vocabulary. Students become enthusiastic in reading digital comics presented in the web pages, and students read them online more than once in a week. It is highlighted that there is an increase in the students' interest in reading.

In face-to-face learning, students have the opportunity to practice their speaking skills and listen to friends or teachers who tell stories. In class, students can interpret words and sentences in the reading texts that they have read online more easily. The quality of classroom discussions is also improved since the students want to participate more. Students can answer teacher questions regarding the contents of the reading texts.

Through observing students' learning activities in class, it was seen that students were very enthusiastic and happy in learning Indonesian. One of the factors is that they have studied the reading materials at home. The diagram 2 shows the results of the non-test instrument from the indicator of observation sheet of students activities in the classroom.

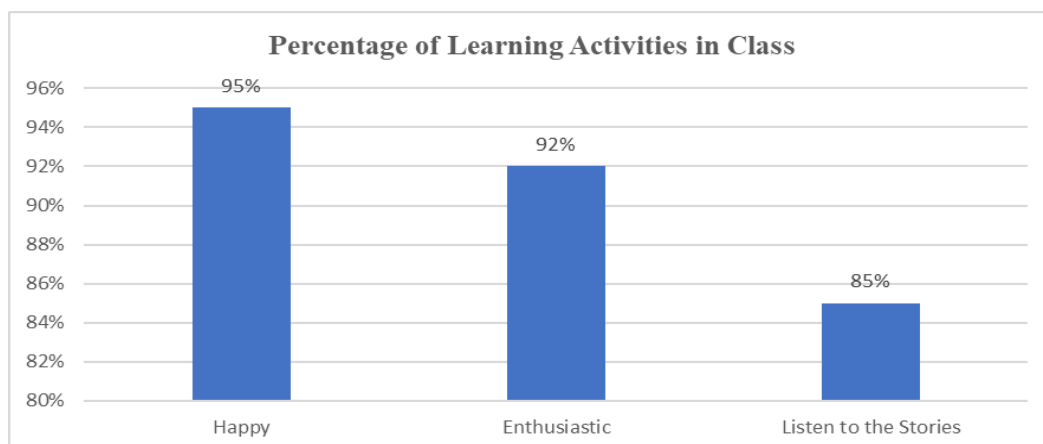
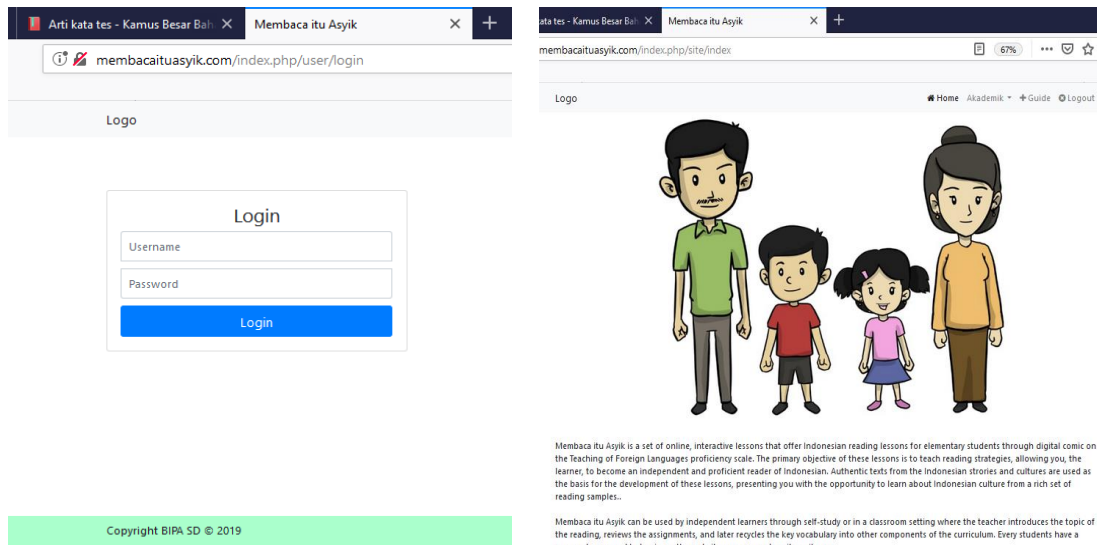


Diagram 2. Students' Learning Activities in the Classroom

Based on the diagram 2 above, it is shown that 95% of the students feel happy in learning Indonesian, 92% of the students are enthusiastic in learning Indonesian and 85% of the students listen carefully to the stories told by the teacher or friends. This shows that the feeling of pleasure can enhance students' motivation. The enthusiasm for learning is also very much needed so students can be more active in their learning. Research revealing that motivation can increase learning enthusiasm and good learning outcomes have also been studied before (Smith & Feng, 2018).

The following are digital comic learning materials as digital reading texts that can be read online or offline and applications used for blended learning.



Picture 1. Display application of www.membacaituasyik.com

Picture 1 is a display of the reading application that can be accessed anywhere. Students can log in first to be able to access reading texts. The comic image display has been adjusted to the characteristics of elementary school students.



Picture 2. Display 1 comic out of 3 comics

In picture 2, one of the three comics is presented as the reading text material. Digital comics are made interesting so that students can enjoy reading them.

The results of the study above show that blended learning is effective in improving the reading comprehension skills of foreign students. It is because blended learning combines online and face to face learning, allowing students to set their own learning (Van Laer, 2018); (Van Laer & Elen, 2018). Students can learn the subject matter at home before discussing it in

face-to-face learning. Therefore, the time management and elaboration strategies are important in blended learning (Broadbent, 2017).

An interesting study conducted in 2006 - 2017 shows the growing use of blended learning in K-12 classes. A 2008 survey of U.S. school district administrators (N = 808) reported that 41% applied blended learning at several levels, with 21% planning to implement blended learning in three years (Picciano, Seaman, & Director, 2009). Research shows that combining face-to-face learning with technology creates an effective teaching and learning environment for students and teachers. Undoubtedly, students who learn through blended learning have higher efforts and better test results than students who use textbooks. It is shown that students also have more responsibility and participation in learning second languages (Eryilmaz, 2015).

Dance's research results in Macedonia in basic education show that learning with technology in language learning through blended learning can develop students' informational and communicational abilities as a support of their learning (Danče, 2010). In blended learning, there is access and transfer of information through interaction methods that combines conventional face-to-face sessions with online or online learning (in networks) (Yigit, Koyun, Yuksel, & Cankaya, 2014). The use of blended learning can not only be implemented in basic education but also in higher education. Blended learning in higher education is shown to be very effective in creating a learning environment with technology access to support students' success in their learning. Students can not only achieve the expected learning outcomes but at the same time also build their awareness of increasing their independence and responsibility (Dziuban, Graham, Moskal, Norberg, & Sicilia, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The results of this research on blended learning conclude that there is an increase on reading comprehension skills that can be seen from the average learning outcomes of pretest and posttest. Through blended learning, students can read over and over the reading texts presented so that they have a plenty of time to interpret sentences that are difficult to understand. The results of observations show that the learning of Indonesian for students who study BIPA in class becomes more interesting, making them enjoy learning Indonesian. The availability of attractive digital comic reading texts can also increase the students' interest in reading. Therefore, learning through blended learning can be an alternative in answering the problem of limited time and the amount of materials that must be learned. Thus, it can give a positive impact on the reading comprehension skills of foreign students learning Indonesian.

Besides, blended learning can be used as a learning method that fits to the characteristics of 21st century students.

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