

# Maximizing Reading Strategies: Helping Students in Facing National Examination of English Subject

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## Abstract

The objectives of this research are firstly to define the best way to introduce to the students the use of various reading strategies in answering English test in National Examination (henceforth called UN) and secondly to investigate whether or not the use of those reading strategies can improve students' score in facing UN. In this research, quantitative method, in the form of quasi-experimental was used by using one group of pre-test and post-test design. The population of this research was all the ninth grade students at SMP Negeri 11 Kota Gorontalo, Indonesia. 40 students were chosen as sample in this research by using purposive sampling technique. In this research, the data were collected from students' test score based on UN test-model in both pre-test and post-test. Then the data were analyzed by using t-test. The result shows that the students' test score of doing UN test model is statistically increased significantly.

**Keywords:** EFL Test, Reading Strategy, National Examination

## 1. Introduction

English as one of the subjects tested in UN sometimes makes most of the students feel unhappy. They are afraid of facing the English UN either before or while doing it. Some of them could not understand the questions, which in turn causes some difficulties to get the correct answers. Moreover, they are bothered of being unable to understand the whole meaning of the reading texts.

Therefore, long before UN comes, teachers have done their best efforts to encourage students to perform better in UN. They get some extra time after the class to deepen students' understanding in regarding to the English material besides other subjects tested in UN. Furthermore, a few weeks before UN being held, the teachers make students study certain subjects examined in UN only.

Unfortunately, on the day of UN, particularly English subject, the students are so nervous and cannot concentrate well to get the correct answers. Solving this problem, students then decide to do cheating. Even sometimes, teachers help them in doing this by letting this happen in their class and other forms of dishonesty during the test. Both teachers and students do this wrong shortcut to make it easy for students to pass UN.

However, English is not as difficult as what they think. It is easy and enjoyable besides challenging particularly dealing with UN. Most of the questions are related to the reading text. So, the answers can be found either intrinsically or extrinsically throughout the passage. As a result, it is not necessary for them to understand all the words and the whole text to get the answer.

Using useful reading strategies and getting contextual meaning of the sentences on each text or paragraph probably could be a stress-free step to solve this anxiety. Helping the students to cope with this problem, it is more likely that introducing useful reading strategies will enable them to get the correct answer based on the reading text.

Paying attention to the above description, the research problems were formulated below: How to introduce and use reading strategies to answer English test in UN and can these strategies improve students' score in UN test model. The research has some objectives; they are to introduce the use of reading strategies in answering UN of English subject and to improve students' score in UN test model which will give more experiences and self-confidence to the students in facing UN by giving them some exercises based on UN test models. Last but not least, it gives a big and beneficial opportunity to share the tips to students who do not have any chance to join a payment based learning guidance known as "BIMBEL" and can be an additional and useful knowledge to teacher when they do the preparation class prior to UN.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Concept of Reading

As a base skill, reading will support someone to get other language skills and its elements. Long time ago, people think that literacy means learning to read, but at the present time, it is changed into reading to learn. Consequently, those who have good reading skill will be more likely to have more information and get valuable experience both related to the language and general knowledge. There is an Indonesian proverb that best describe the above statement, it is *membaca adalah gudang ilmu* (reading is a source of knowledge). This proverb indicates that reading habit will help reader to attain more information regarding to the language and knowledge.

Traditionally, it is believed that reading is a process of decoding written symbols to sounds. However, due to the development of reading, it has shifted from sounding the written symbols to understand the meaning. Nowadays, reading is considered as an activity done by inferring the meaning of certain written language form. It is a solitary activity in which the reader interacts himself with the written language (Nunan, 1999). Reading will be an interesting thing and a source of knowledge if the readers know the meaning of what is being read.

Reading is an activity in understanding certain and generally acceptable written symbol involving both cognitive and psychomotor aspects. In addition, Anderson (2001) states that reading is a psycholinguistics process starting by encoding linguistic surface representation and finishing by constructing meaning in readers' mind. It implies that reading as the ability to comprehend a written and printed material is not only limited with the notions of realization, having a grasp of the proper meaning or reading the sentences of a certain languages, but also it is quite a complex process demanding high level of thinking skills (Aebersold & Field, 1997; Anderson, 2001; Brown, 2000).

Having read a certain passage, a reader will probably comprehend the writer's intention to say something in written language form. Concordantly, comprehension skills can be expressed as the complete phases in making the reading texts being understandable for the reader by mentally processing the information input obtained after the reading activity (Wallace, 1992). To get the meaning of a certain text, a reader needs to have a good comprehension supported by a wide range of vocabulary and language structure.

The level of reading comprehension can be designated by asking questions about the reading text being read and evaluating the related answers in verbal or written way. The real objective of reading is fast and right grasp of the meaning. Students who have a better reading skill, understand what it is being read, have a rich verbal repertoire and have a good master of the language, learn more easily and have higher rates of success.

### 2.2 Reading Strategies

As the main purpose of the reading is the interaction between the readers and ideas, students should possess the required skills and strategies in order to get information out of written resources. Efficient readers use a number of reading comprehension strategies before they start reading during the time they read and after they finish reading.

Strategies are defined as learning techniques, behaviors, problem-solving or study skills which make learning more effective and efficient (Oxford, 1992). In the context of reading, reading strategies indicate how readers conceive a task, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand (Seymour & Walsh, 2006). Reading strategies refer to the mental operations involved when readers purposefully approach a text and make sense of what they read (Kathleen & Nunan, 1996)

In short, reading strategies are deliberate, conscious techniques that readers employ to enhance their comprehension or retention of the textual information. Specifically, they have the following characteristics: (1) deliberate, conscious plans, techniques and skills; (2) aiming to enhance reading comprehension and overcome comprehension failures; and (3) behavioral and mental (Oxford, 1992; Hansen, 1992). Reading strategies are for the interest for what they reveal about the way readers manage their interaction with the written text and how these strategies are related to text comprehension.

Many studies have found reading strategies useful when implemented before, during or after reading (Carter, 1998; Chang & Banya, 1998; Freeman, 1998; Anderson, 2001). Reading strategies include rereading, scanning, summarizing, keywords, context clues, question-answer relationships, inferring, thinking aloud, activating prior knowledge, setting a purpose, and drawing conclusions.

The keyword strategy has been found, through research, to be useful in improving students' ability to comprehend. Chang & Banya (1998) conducted research through open-ended interviews, observation, and think-aloud protocol with four Chinese students and found that the students mainly used keywords and inference as their reading strategies to comprehend the whole text.

Furthermore, Lewis (1999) found that learners of English as second language need the keyword strategy as a scaffold during the reading process. Some researchers found significant effects on reading comprehension, such as employing keyword strategies before reading. For example, Lightbrown & Spada (1999) found that students obtained high comprehension scores when they previewed materials and discussed keywords before reading.

### *2.3 Teaching English Reading through Various Strategies*

Readers derive meaning from the texts being read, think about this and then evaluate are the required phases for a meaningful and qualified reading process. However, for junior high school students, they need only a simple reading strategy to cope with their problems in understanding a reading passage and then can answer the questions related to the text.

Most reading texts in UN are narrative, descriptive and recount texts. It is known that in reading comprehension test all answers are either intrinsically or extrinsically provided. Therefore, it is important for the students to know the necessary keywords to help them answer the questions correctly. No matter what kinds of texts come may in UN, students should recognize keywords to guide them in choosing the correct answer and obtaining good score to pass UN.

It has been known that there are some factors affect the reading process such as background knowledge and previous reading experience and motivation (Graves, 2000; Yule, 2006). At the basic level teachers recognize that giving students reading material that is too difficult is damaging to the learning process and de-motivating to the students. Texts of the right reading level are neither too easy nor too hard for a particular reader (Paltridge, 2004).

Furthermore, Tomlinsion (1998) explains that choosing texts of the right difficulty and interest levels will encourage children to read and to enjoy what they are reading. Vocabulary, word length, grammatical complexity and sentence length are traditionally used to indicate the difficulty level of a text.

As reading is not just all about following the word order in the texts and vocalizing them, teaching some strategies to the students for developing their reading comprehension aids to strengthen the meaningful reading (Richard & Rodgers, 2001). In addition, Woodward (2001) stated that there are three main activities in reading namely: pre-reading, while reading and post-reading strategies help to obtain the utmost level efficiency from the reading done. The first is pre-reading including prior knowledge, subject matter and linguistics knowledge such as vocabulary and language functions.

Secondly, while reading consisting of discussing new words, terms and concepts, asking questions, identifying main ideas. The last is post-reading involving summarize what they have learnt and answering questing related to the test. Teachers can guide students by modelling the actions they can take to improve comprehension. These actions include: asking questions about a text while reading; identifying main ideas; using prior knowledge to make predictions.

In addition, dealing with UN of English subject in Junior High School, it is also useful to know and to use skimming and scanning techniques in getting the correct answer. Skimming is very suitable to be used in answering the questions regarding to main ideas, writer's point of view and other similar questions since it is a reading technique used to understand the main idea of the paragraph or topic of certain passage by reading only the first sentence and the last sentence of the paragraph. Meanwhile, scanning which requires the reader to be careful in reading certain words or sentences to know their meanings is advantageous to be used in finding out specific words or phrases which lead to the correct answer.

### 3. Method

The method used in this research was quantitative in the form of quasi-experiment designed in one group of pre-test and post-test. In one group pre-test and post-test design, there was only one class used without comparator class. The population of this research was the ninth grade students of SMP Negeri 11 Kota Gorontalo consist of 168 students. They were spread over in four classes. From the population above, 40 students were chosen as sample in this research by using purposive sampling. The characteristics of the sample are indicated by the level of their reading comprehension from low to medium category. While from socio-economics, they are categorized in low to middle class. Thus, it seems a good representative for this research.

In conducting the research, the first step, a pre-test was given. After that, treatment in this case, using useful reading strategies in answering UN test model was done. The last step was post-test given to the sample. In this research, the data were collected from students' test score of English subject based on UN test-model in both pre-test and post-test. In analyzing the data, students' answer were scored 1 if it was correct and 0 if it was incorrect.

In hypothesis verification, t-test formula was used. This formula was used to find whether or not using reading strategies can improve students' score in English test based on UN model. The formula is as follow:

- a. Assembling of the hypothesis that is tested :  
Ho :  $\mu_1 \neq \mu_2$   
Ha :  $\mu_1 \neq \mu_2$
- b. Real stage  $\alpha = 0,05$
- c. Statistical formula used in verifying hypothesis

$$t = \frac{X_1 - X_2}{\sqrt{\frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2}}}$$
$$S^2 = \frac{(n_1 - 1)S_1^2 + (n_2 - 1)S_2^2}{n_1 + n_2 - 2} \quad (\text{Sudjana, 2005: 239})$$

Where:

$\overline{X}_1$  = the evarage value of pre-test

$\overline{X}_2$  = the evarage value of post-test

$n_1$  = the number of sample of pre-test

$n_2$  = the number of sample of post-test

$S_1$  = standard of devition of pre-test

$S_2$  = standard of devition of post-test

$S$  = the standard of devition of both pre-test and post-test

#### *The Criterion of Testing Hypothesis*

Accepted Ho if  $-t(1-\frac{1}{2}\alpha) \leq t \leq t(1-\frac{1}{2}\alpha)$

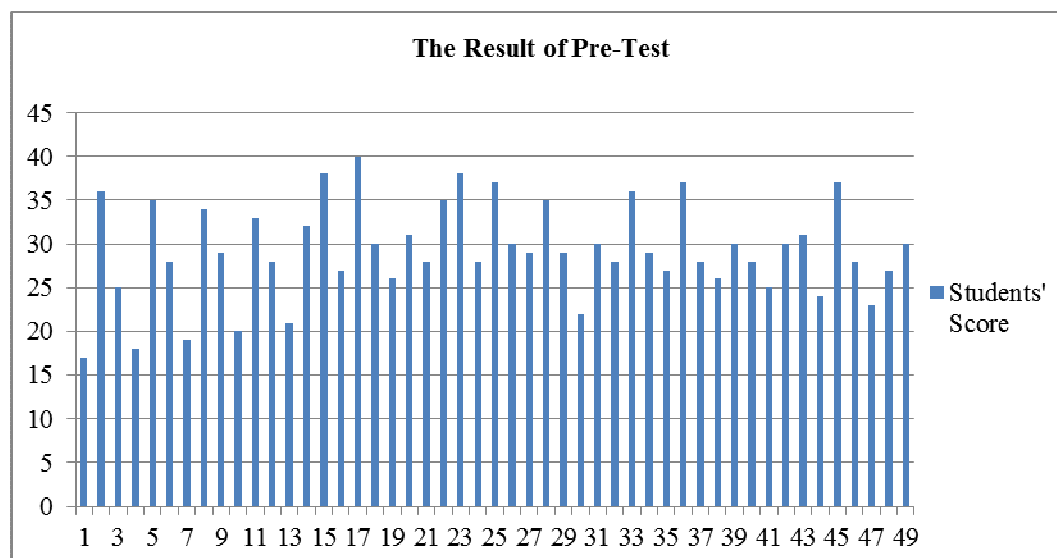
Rejected Ho if  $-t(1-\frac{1}{2}\alpha) \geq t \geq t(1-\frac{1}{2}\alpha)$

### 4. Findings and Discussion

#### 4.1 Findings

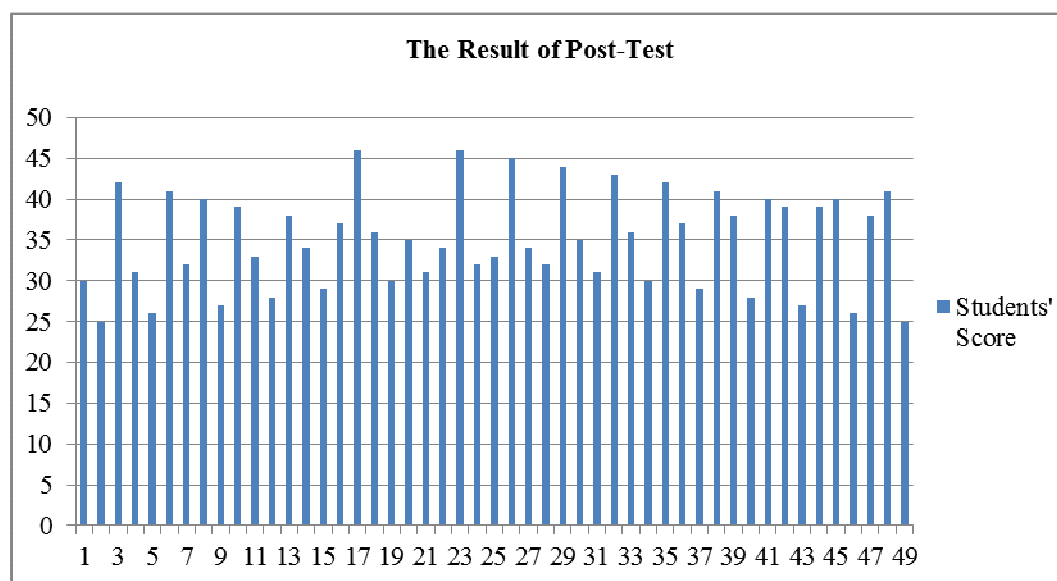
After analyzing the collected data, it is found the following data about pre-test and post-test which are presented in the diagrams below.

Graphic 1: The Students' Score in Pre-Test



From the graphic 1 above, it is seen that the highest score is 40 (gained by 1 student only/sample no.17) and the lowest score is 17 (1 student only/sample no.1). The average score is 29.22, median is 37 and standard deviation is 5.46 and the total sum of score is 1432.

Graphic 2: The Students' Score in Post-Test



From the graphic 2 above, it is seen that the highest score is 46 (got by 2 students only/sample no.17 and 23) and the lowest score is 25 (2 students only/sample no. 2 and 49). The average score is 35.00, median is 33 and standard deviation is 5.90. The total sum of score is 1715.

By comparing both of the results, it is clear that there is a significant increasing of students' reading comprehension when keywords are using as a reading strategy. The comparison can be seen in the table below.

Table 1. The Comparison of Results both Pre-Test and Post-Test

Students' Score	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Improvement
Lowest	17 (1 Students)	25 (2 Students)	8
Highest	40 (1 Students)	46 (2 Students)	6
Average (Mean)	29.22	35.00	5.78
Total Score	1432	1715	283

## 4.2 Discussion

### 4.2.1 Introducing and Using Reading Strategies

Most of the questions in UN test model for Junior High School are regarding to reading passage. Therefore, the students need to be introduced to the use of reading strategies which can guide them to get the correct answer. In doing the UN of English subject, students had better use reading strategies to guide them to get the correct answer of each question. 120 minutes are given to answer 50 questions. It is more than enough for the students to finish answering all the questions correctly. However, based on the result of pre-test, most of the students got low score due to limited knowledge about English in terms of mostly vocabulary and grammar. Most of them found it was difficult to get the correct answer although they are stated implicitly or explicitly throughout the passage.

However, dealing with English reading test in UN of Junior High School, it does not really matter if the students have limited vocabularies since by using suitable strategies and having keywords, the answer can be found. Therefore, during the treatment phase, the students were introduced how to use reading strategies which can guide them to get the correct answers. All the types of questions were explained based on the UN test model of the previous years. There are several main types of questions which permanently repeated in each years. They are only different in terms of vocabulary and topic used. Below are the types of questions and how to see and use reading strategies and keywords leading to the answer.

#### 1. Short Notices and Invitation Letters

Pay attention to the main content of notices. Usually, it is preceded by **"please ..... or please do not ....."**. This will be a very useful sign which can be considered as keyword to get the answer. Then, just directly find a choice (whether a, b, c, d) which best describes the word or phrase after the keywords **"please ..... or please do not ....."**. Another thing to pay attention to is the similar meaning of the word or phrase, for example **"please do not"** means **prohibition**. So, the students need to use scanning technique to search any words or phrases which suitable or printed in one of the choices.

#### 2. Main Idea of the Text

This type of questions may be formulated differently for example: **the text tells/shows us about/that ..., what is the topic of the passage, what is the writer's main point in the passage, etc.** The students can get the answer by simply using skimming technique searching it in the top part of the text or the first sentence of the paragraph since most of the readings are written deductively. Then they need to check the choice which contain those keywords as signalized in the passage.

#### 3. Stated and Unstated or True and False

To get the answer of this type of questions, the students are just simply use scanning technique to check which one is **true or untrue** based on the passage and then compare which the choices. In other words, the students

should get an appropriate keyword in each choice which is found in the text. The correct answer is a choice which states something similar to the passage.

#### 4. Vocabulary

There are various forms of question related to vocabulary for example: **the underlined/ bold/ italic word refers to .../have similar meaning to ....** For this question, the students should pay attention to the word/phrase before or after the word asked and the similar meaning of those words/phrases written in the passage. The answer will be the choice which contains the word/phrase before the word asked.

Another form of vocabulary test is fill in the blank based on the certain passage. Students need to pay attention to the type of text whether it is narrative or recount which implies past action, descriptive which implies present action. This will help them in determining the types of verbs that will be used to fill the blanks. Besides, it is also important to use summarize technique to know the general context of the passage to get the suitable answer.

#### 5. WH-Questions

For these questions, students should know these keywords that **what** implies that the answer will be noun, **who** implies that people will be the answer, **when** is used for asking time, **where** is used for asking place, **why** is used to ask reasons, **which** is to ask preference, **how** is used to ask quantity, quality, condition, process and ways. To get the answer, the students just need to check for the rightness of the **wh**-questions asked that written in the text with the possible choice. Again, the use of scanning technique is helpful in this type of question. The students need to see any words that written in the questions and choices and search them in passage. If the words/phrases in the questions and/or choices are found on the passage, be aware that the possible correct answer is the right or left of them. Then, the students need to check their choice to get the correct answer. If you get it in A for example, so the answer will be choice A. It is also useful to understand the synonym and antonym of the word or phrase because sometimes what is written in the passage are the synonym of the keywords in the questions or choices.

#### 6. Rearrange the Sentence or Paragraph

This types of question requires students to have a good understanding of English grammar, the structure of sentences and paragraph. In this case, students need to rearrange the parts of a sentence into a meaningful sentence or the sentences into a meaningful paragraph. A sentence consist of words or phrases arranged logically and semantically correct. Similar to sentence, a paragraph consists of sentences connected logically, grammatically and semantically accepted.

To rearrange jumble words/phrases into a good sentence, there are some useful strategies, they are:

- a. Pay attention to the punctuation used. This will help to decide the type of sentence whether it is a positive or negative sentence, or an interrogative or an exclamation sentence.
- b. Having the clues, students can directly decide the pattern of a sentence which consists of S + V/Aux + O + Adv. or different pattern for example Aux + S + V + Adv. based on the type of sentence.

To rearrange jumble sentences into a good paragraph, students can do the following helpful strategies. They are:

- a. Identify the opening and/or closing sentence. Paragraph is mostly written deductively, thus, the thesis statement will in the beginning of the paragraph. Meanwhile, conclusion or the end of a paragraph will be a sentence which paraphrases the thesis statement. In other words, the end of a paragraph should be the sentence which has similar meaning to the thesis statement or the first sentence of the paragraph.
- b. Search for connectors to sentences e.g. conjunctions (and, or, but, however, etc.), personal (she, he, it, etc.), and other important signals such as time signal to correlate the sentences and chronological signal such as first, second, last, finally.

Additionally, in getting the answer, it is also worthwhile for the students to use elimination process. They can eliminate the most possible wrong choices and keep at least two choices left, which may give them a fifty-fifty change to get the correct answer. Do not waste time thinking about getting the correct answer of certain questions that are not known for sure. Besides, it is useful to leave difficult questions and move to the next number in order to get easier questions. Read the questions quickly and get the main point of these questions then search them in the passage. This strategy will make the students have more confidence in doing their best during exam. Later, they can return to finish the missing questions. It is advisably to have a good, logic and

quick guessing. Make sure to answer all the questions and do not leave the answer sheet empty since there is no penalty for the wrong answer.

Having explained about the use of reading strategies in terms of what they are about and how to recognize and use them during treatment, students knew what to do dealing with reading in UN test model given in post-test. The students became more confident and more comfortable in doing the test. In short, they could perform better in doing their post-test proven by the significant improvement of score obtained.

## 5. Conclusions

Paying attention to the above findings and discussion, it can be concluded that by applying such useful reading strategies in doing English test in UN, students will possibly find that English test is easier and a stress-free challenge. It is also hoped that there will be no more students fail due to English subject. Additionally, it can motivate other teachers of UN tested subjects to find some tricks to enable the students get good score and pass UN.

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