

# IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH DIRECTED READING-THINKING ACTIVITY (DRTA) STRATEGY

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**Abstract:** This paper highlights the findings of a study which was undertaken at Islamic State College of Palangka Raya. The aim of the study was to describe how the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (henceforth DRTA) strategy can improve reading comprehension. The data were taken from observation, field notes, questionnaire, and achievement test. The result reveals that the DRTA not only improves students' comprehension but also increases their motivation in learning.

**Key words:** Comprehension, DRTA, expository, reading skill, text

Among the four language skills, reading is the most important one since every aspect of life involves reading. For example road signs, traffic regulation, menus in restaurants, labels on cans, printed advertisements, newspapers, magazines, insurance forms, and so forth (Burns et al., 1996:4). The ability to master this skill determines students' mastery of other skills since the success in reading is very important to students in both academic and vocational advancement and for the students' psychological well being (Carnine, et al., 1990:3). Its importance makes reading receive a special focus in many second or foreign-language situations (Richards and Renandya, 2002:273).

The most important object in reading activity is text. Anderson & Anderson (2003:1) define *text* as something constructed when a person speaks or writes to communicate a message. The reading activity begins when a reader tries to understand the meaning of the transferred message. In general, there are two main categories of text: literary and informational. Literary and informational texts are marked by distinct structural characteristics that readers rely on as they seek to under-

stand what they read (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000). Literary texts aim to appeal reader's emotion and imagination, while informational (factual) texts aim to show, tell or persuade the audience (Anderson & Anderson, 2003:3). The nature of texts affects comprehension and different text types must be read in different ways (Pearson & Camperell, 1994). Therefore, the teaching of reading should emphasize the teaching of both literary and informational texts (NAEP Governing Board, 2008:7).

Among the two categories, reader needs to work harder in reading for information (informational texts) than in reading for pleasure (literary texts). Carnine et al. (1990:339) state that in the attempt to comprehend expository materials reader is expected to extract, integrate, and retain significant main ideas and details presented in the material and to learn many specialized vocabulary terms. It is because expository uses new organizational structures, uses more difficult to decode and understand vocabulary, uses higher dense of concept, and introduces unique typographic features. As the result, expository is considered to be more difficult than narrative. According to Mason and Au (1990:126), students

have more trouble comprehending exposition because (1) they do not have much experience reading expository texts, (2) teachers do not usually teach students strategies needed for understanding expository texts, and (3) students may not have sufficient background knowledge of the topic of the selection, or of the structure of the text.

On the contrary, much of the reading we do is for information—sometimes for school purposes and other times for our own. For instance, in reading newspapers and magazines; browse the World Wide Web; reading brochures and manuals; and following directions on appliances and in recipes (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2008:91). In fact, Smith's (2000) study on the reading practices by students and adults indicates that the majority of reading done by middle and high school students as well as by adults is informational in nature.

In addition, in order to comprehend a text reader needs to recognize words and to compare what is written in the text with when it is used in conversation (to decode), to activate and build what a reader already knows (schemata), to integrate the schemata with what is understood from the discourse, to utilize reading strategies in tackling reading problems, and to be aware of their reading process. These requirements should be established within every process of teaching reading. Apparently it takes greater will, plan and determination of teachers to meet this goal.

Researchers have found that teaching reading strategies is important to developing increased student comprehension. At the same time, they have found many teachers lack a solid foundation for teaching these reading comprehension strategies (National Reading Panel, 2005). Therefore, teachers need to be prepared, through professional development, on how to design effective comprehension strategies and how to teach these strategies to their students. Improving reading skills is a top priority for all educators (McKown & Barnett, 2007:4). Regarding the problems and the

requirements of comprehension, consequently English teachers; particularly the reading teachers, needs to provide appropriate teaching and learning process of expository texts by selecting and adapting appropriate teaching strategy that meets the requirement of comprehension and is effective in solving problems in reading expository materials.

From the many strategies in teaching expository texts, Stauffer's (1969) Directed-Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) is the most appropriate strategy that meets the requirement of comprehension (build schemata, provide opportunities in using reading strategy, and enable the students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their reading process) and is suitable for reading informational text (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2008). The DRTA (Stauffer, 1969) is a group-inquiry reading approach for guiding readers through a text during the first time they read it in a classroom. It comprises the three stages in reading (pre-, whilst- and post) with three phases particularly at the whilst-reading stage: pre-reading phase, guided silent-reading phase, and post-reading (prove) phase. Tankersley (2005) states that the DRTA extends reading to higher-order thought processes and provides lecturers with a great deal about each student's ideas, thought processes, prior knowledge and thinking skills.

This text comprehension strategy serves several purposes: (a) elicits students' prior knowledge of the topic of the text; (b) encourages students to monitor their comprehension while they are reading, and (c) sets a purpose for reading. The students read to confirm and revise predictions they are making through three phases, namely: pre-reading, guided silent reading, and post-reading. In the application of this strategy, learners make speculation on what the writer will say in the text (e.g. making prediction of the topic, the content, what the text will be about, and what will happen next). During the reading process, the learners will stop in certain part of the text in order to prove or to verify their first predic-

tion. After that they will begin reading after making another prediction. The emphasis of this comprehension strategy is in the ability to make prediction. The DRTA provides the teacher opportunity to guide students to think like good readers do – anticipating, predicting, and then confirming and modifying their ideas with the story as it unfolds (Blachowich & Ogle, 2008).

The focus of this article is in providing the answer to question “How can Directed Reading Thinking Activity (henceforth DRTA) improve students’ comprehension in reading expository text?” It is aimed at describing the implementation of DRTA strategy in improving the reading comprehension of the second semester students at the English Education Study Program of STAIN Palangka Raya in academic year 2009/2010.

## METHOD

The study employed Collaborative Classroom Action Research (CAR) designs under the procedure of (a) identifying classroom problem(s), (b) planning, (c) implementing, (d) observing, and (e) evaluating. The subjects of the study were thirty-three students of the second semester of the English Education Study Program of STAIN Palangka Raya in 2009/2010 academic year. The data were both qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative data derived from the students’ active participation during the implementation of the strategy, while the quantitative data were taken from the result of reading achievement test conducted at the end of each cycle. The instruments used in collecting the data were achievement test, observation, field notes and questionnaire.

The result of preliminary study conducted by the researcher in March 2010 showed that the students had problems in identifying topic and main ideas, distinguishing major and minor details, recognizing author’s organization the text structure, drawing inference, and identifying literal information from the text.

Among narrative, descriptive, and expository texts, the latest was considered to be most difficult. The identified causes were because of the lack of background knowledge, the lack of knowledge of reading strategies, the lack of use of reading strategies, the lack of students’ active involvement during the teaching and learning process, and the lack of students’ awareness of the reading process.

In order to solve the classroom’s problem, together with the collaborator teacher the researcher designed the lesson plan and the criteria of success of the study at the *planning* phase; *implemented* the DRTA strategy in two cycles with four meetings for cycle 1 and three meetings for cycle 2; recorded and collected data dealing with the teaching and learning activities of Reading Comprehension II using Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA) in the classroom and data about any aspect or event that occurs in the teaching and learning process at the *observing* phase; and evaluates the strength and the weakness of the strategy implemented in the class at the *reflecting* phase.

There were three phases of activity in each meeting: pre-reading stage, whilst reading stage, and post reading stage. Students’ participation in each stage was reflected through their responses and interests toward step by step activity in the three phases of the DRTA strategy itself: pre-reading stage, guided silent-reading stage and post-reading stage. The better the technique implemented the more active the students participate in the activities. By the end of each cycle, students’ reflection on the implemented technique was captured through questionnaire.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this section comprised the steps in conducting Reading Comprehension II subject using DRTA strategy and the students’ active participation during the class. Based on the results of the achievement test, overall progress of observation re-

sults, reflections from questionnaire, results of the field notes and results of students' worksheet, it was concluded that the students had successfully improved their achievement in term of reading comprehension and their learning participation in term of active and positive engagement in learning process.

By the end of the Cycle 2, the students gained significant improvement in the achievement, reflecting that the process of learning had effectively touched the main causes of their reading difficulties. The increased ability to recognize structure used by writer in organizing expository text in the restructuring activity has relevancy to the increase of their reading comprehension. The following is the improvement of students' scores from pre-test, cycle-1 and cycle-2.

### **Figure 1 Students' Scores in Pre-test, Cycle-1, and Cycle-2**

As in the figure above, there was decrease in the number of students whose score at the poor and fair category. In the pre-test, there were 7 students whose score are at the poor category. However, in cycle-1, these numbers decreased into 5. Moreover, there were 5 students whose score improved from the fair category and reached the target score. There was also a slight increase in students whose score achieved the very good category (from one to two students). The improvement continues as there were fourteen (14) students whose score improved from *fair* to *good* category in cycle-2. Meanwhile, there were four (14) students whose scores improved from the *poor* into *fair* category. There was only one student whose score remains at the *poor* category although there was a slight improvement (from 59 to 64). Moreover, there were 10 students whose score improved from *good* to *very good*.

This improvement showed the utilization of DRTA solved students' problems in comprehending expository text through enabling the students in identifying the topic, main idea, literal information within the text,

writer's organization and text structure by utilizing the text structure strategy and being aware of how the text organized.

Besides, the procedure of DRTA with restructuring was proven to be effective in providing opportunity for the students to think like good readers do: activate and build schemata, and utilize effective strategies during reading. In the first place, the DRTA was effective in activating and building students' schemata. Under the teacher's direct instruction students' schemata were built by pictures and key words vocabularies given at the pre-reading activities. This procedure was in line with Anderson's (1999:12) theory that before asking the students to read reading teacher needs to establish background so that they have sufficient information to understand the text. Within the process of learning using DRTA, the students utilize what they have known about the text and try to find its relation with the existing information the text provides as they verify the preciseness of their prediction. By doing this, the students construct meaning by using all the available resources from both the text and previous knowledge (Yazdanpanah, 2007:64). This schemata building activity gained positive response from the students – particularly the low proficient readers – as the number of students raised hands to state oral prediction increase during the implementation of the DRTA (from 56% to 76.5%). With the teacher's encouragement, the students were motivated to state their previous knowledge (activate their schemata) and making pre-assessment of what information to be delivered by the writer in the text.

Besides activating schemata, good readers utilize strategies during reading. Stahl (2004:598) states that strategies in reading can be tools in the assimilation, refinement, and use of content, and it is believed as the reader is actively engage in particular cognitive strategies (activating prior knowledge, predicting, organizing, questioning, summa-

izing, and creating a mental image), he/she will be likely to understand and recall more of what they read.

The procedure of learning reading using DRTA provides opportunity for the students to utilize reading strategies. First of all, the materials were arranged in order to make the students aware of the main component of

standing and memory of the text, and this is not done without guidance." In other words the students do not automatically utilize effective strategies during reading. Moreover, Meyer et al.'s (1980) believe "good readers employed a text structure strategy, which is a strategy entailed searching for the primary thesis of or text structure that subsumed or

*Table 1 Progress of Students' Involvement in Two Cycles*

Stages	Indicators	Progress Percentages	
		Cycle 1	Cycle 2
<i>Pre-reading</i>	Responding to schemata building activity performed by the teacher	48%	76.5%
	a. Sitting in group	100%	100%
<i>Whilst-reading</i>	b. Raising hands to formulate prediction orally	56%	76.5%
	c. Discussing list of prediction with their partners and raising hands to state preferred prediction	82%	85.5%
	d. Reading silently and highlight/underline sentences confirming/rejecting their prediction	94.3%	96.5%
	e. Raising hand to evaluate their predictions using information from the text to support their opinions	52%	70.5%
<i>Post-reading</i>	f. Raising hands to identify text's ideas organization	35%	69.5%
	g. Completing the DR-TA graphic organizer	0 (*)	100
	h. Raising hands to answer comprehension questions orally	52%	70.5%
<b>Overall results</b>		<b>64.03 %</b>	<b>83.00%</b>

\*) This activity only occurred in Cycle-2

essays. Intentionally, the teacher provides/marks the introductory sentences, thesis statement, controlling ideas, major and minor details, and concluding sentences. During reading, the students learned to move their eyes effectively only the important information. Along with time, the students were gradually able to read in chunk. This procedure was given on the basis of Brown et al.'s (1995:256) statement that "able readers with the most reading abilities coordinate the use of multiple reading strategies to improve their under-

bound large chunks of information into clusters of related details corresponding to the macrostructures in reading. Another reading in chunk activity occurs when the students complete the graphic organizers. They have determined of what they need to know in the text (use of structure) and complete the graphic organizer. This activity enables students remember the important information in the text. The students actively involved during this activity by 94.3% in the first cycle and 96.5% in the second cycle.

Then, along with the three phases of DRTA, the students automatically utilize reading strategies such as anticipating, predicting, confirming and modifying their ideas with the text. They anticipate what information to be encounter in the text using their prior knowledge through predicting, confirming their pre-comprehension with the information provided by the text, and modifying their ideas as they find their prediction different from the existing information found in the text. The usage of the reading strategies enables them to be efficient readers. This effectiveness of the procedure of DRTA supported by the students 96% in the first questionnaire in cycle 1 and 100% in the questionnaire in the second cycle. This is in line with Jennings and Shepherd's (1998) finding that the DRTA helps students become aware of the reading strategies, understand the reading process, and develop prediction skills. They add that this strategy stimulates students' thinking and makes them listen to the opinions of others and modify their own in light of additional information.

Another effectiveness of the procedure of DRTA in enabling the students to do what other good readers do is in enabling the students monitor their comprehension. By being constantly aware of the connections they make between text knowledge and world knowledge, the students monitor their comprehension by comparing the formulated prediction with the existing information used in the text. Morrison (2004) believes that language learners need to be taught comprehension monitoring techniques and he recommends DRTA as one of the technique in helping the students to monitor their comprehension.

In regard with the students' participation in the teaching and learning process of each cycle, the data obtained from observation showed positive results. The low proficient students' involvement in Cycle 2 gradually improved much better than in the previous cycle. The changes on the procedures in Cycle

2 displayed good impacts to the group. The students enthusiastically formulated and verified prediction orally. The following is the resume of students' involvement during the learning process in cycle-1 and cycle-2.

From the table above, the students realized the importance of restructuring activity (item e and f) as they effectively raised hand in identifying the use of particular structure in expository text in facilitating their comprehension and in completing the graphic organizers. This finding recommends that the procedure of DRTA improves students' self confidence. Students' self confidence improved as they given opportunity to practice interacting with the text and identifying key components of the text. Under the teacher's direct instruction through modeling and guidance in the forms of leading questions, the students were able to scrutinize the text efficiently and effectively as they have determined and achievable goal and clear steps in the effort to accomplish the goal. The improvement in self confidence reflected in the increase of number of students who raised their hands to formulate prediction orally, to verify the preciseness of their prediction orally, and to confirm their comprehension. The students admitted this effectiveness by 89% in the first cycle and 100% in the second cycle. Furthermore, they recommend this strategy to be used in reading any kinds of reading material by other students.

Besides their self confidence, the students' motivations to learn were also improved during the implementation of the DRTA strategy. Through the teacher's active involvement by giving direct instruction, students were motivated to be actively involved in all the stages of the reading process. This is reflected in the increase of percentage of their involvement in the learning process which increased significantly from 58.14% to 79.2%. This finding supports Abi Samara's (2006) statement that the DRTA is an effective strategy for teaching reading comprehension because it helps stu-

dents set reading purposes by making predictions, read more actively and enthusiastically, and remember more information from what they read.

During the teaching and learning process, the teacher's involvement during the teaching and learning process was very important to provide help for the students in achieving the goal of the learning: to comprehend the content of expository text. However, the 'help' provided by the teacher here does not merely test students' memory of the text read. Instead, the procedure leads the students to process the text by providing guidance and at the same time gradually release the responsibility to the students.

Finally, the procedure of teaching reading using DRTA and graphic organizer produces independent readers. First of all, the students utilized reading strategies independently and confidently. Therefore, it supported Kamil's (2003:5) definition of strategies in reading as those directed and intended by the students in order to build independence in reading. Then, as the teacher gradually released the responsibility to the students, the procedure of DRTA can be independently utilized by the students themselves independently. This is supporting Richardson and Morgan's (1997) finding that the DRTA engages students in higher order thinking skills and that these skills include making connections between interrelated elements of the text, justifying thought processes and drawing logical conclusions. They maintain that these skills can set the pathway toward independent reading, foster learner responsibility and improve reading comprehension. This finding is in line with the principle of teaching reading stated by Blachowicz and Ogle (2008) that "good teachers know their students and provide the needed guidance and support as they consciously move from direct instruction to a release of responsibility to their students".

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The conclusion arrives at the description of how Directed Reading Thinking Activity

strategy can improve reading skill of the second semester English Department students of Islamic State College of Palangka Raya. The research findings showed that affirmative development of the students' reading comprehension was rendered from the increase of language proficiency in relation to expository writer's organization they recognized through sequential activities of the DRTA.

The achievement gain showed encouraging result as indicated by the increasing mean score which was 70 in preliminary study and steadily increased 72.93 in Cycle 1 and reached 80 in Cycle 2, revealing that twenty eight (84%) of the students scored above average of 75 out 100 points. Five (15%) of the students scored below minimum target of 75 points which to some extent raised better than their previous results. In regard with the students' participation in the teaching and learning process in the two cycles (six meetings), the analysis of observation, field notes, and questionnaire data demonstrated positive results in that the students actively engaged in the learning process.

The improvement of the achievement tests and learning participation were encompassed through three stages of DRTA strategy namely: pre-reading, whilst-reading, and post-reading stages. In the pre-reading stage the students were introduced to promote their language proficiency in the schemata building activity by the display of pictures and introduction of new/contextual vocabularies on the whiteboard.

In the whilst-reading stage, the teacher initiated the three phases of DRTA: predicting, guided-silent reading, and post-reading (prove) phases. Activities at the prediction stage are: (1) writing the title of the text to be read on the whiteboard, (2) grouping the class, (3) giving modeling of how to state prediction, (4) delivering the DRTA worksheet, (5) asking the students to formulate prediction orally, (6) writing the students' prediction on the whiteboard and (7) asking the stu-

dents to discuss the prediction listed on the whiteboard and to state their preference.

The activities at the second phase of the DRTA (guided silent-reading phase) are (1) delivering the text to read, (2) asking students to read the text purposefully, and (3) giving modeling of how to verify prediction. Then, the activities at the post-reading phase are: (1) asking students to confirm their prediction and (2) asking students to verify their prediction by showing sentences or information provided in the text supporting or rejecting their prediction.

Following the DRTA, restructuring and comprehension questions were added at the post-reading activity. The steps at the restructuring are (1) asking student to identify the use of particular structure used in the text, and (2) asking students to complete the provided incomplete graphic organizers. Finally, students' comprehension toward the text was evaluated through oral comprehension questions.

To follow up the conclusion, some suggestions are proposed to the English students, teachers/lecturers and other researchers. The Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) was effective and suitable to improve reading comprehension in terms of providing the students opportunity to utilize reading strategies, to enhance students' self confidence, and to produce independent learners. However, since the DRTA is effective for reading both literary and informational, the students suggested applying the strategy independently not only in the classroom but also outside wherever they are reading any type of text.

For English teacher/lecturer, regarding the effectiveness of DRTA they are recommended to teach reading using DRTA and also in improving reading comprehension or other skills (e.g. listening, speaking, and writing). Finally, for other researchers, the development of appropriate procedure of DRTA strategy in another action research can be conducted with different reading microskills and different level of proficiency.

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