EFL READING FOR STUDENTS OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

There was a high demand for the students of the Philosophy and Theology Department to read Philosophy texts in English. However, the students lacked the English reading skills complicated by their English language inhibition. Addressing the students' problems in this paper, I propose a reading course design the implementation of which was carried out holistically, to attend to both the cognitive and affective sides of the students, enhancing their motivation and positive concepts about themselves and others, and building their self-confidence.

Considering the students' learning needs and their challenges, I designed a 16-week (sixteen week) reading course consisting of introduction to some understanding about reading skills, sentence patterns, connecting words, referents, and some tips to reading and understanding Philosophy. Starting from some general reading texts, specific texts on philosophy later became the focus. Preceded by some informal talk in each meeting, some songs and poems were also incorporated to attend to the affective side to address the students' inhibition. The learning activities were of various types, individual reading, pair work, group work to class discussion, and reading theater to engage the students in active participation. Besides the class meetings, the students were engaged in home assignments, vocabulary expansion and extensive reading.

The evaluation of the course and its implementation were revealed through the students' reflection of their learning experience and their self-evaluation, which gives some positive inputs on the teaching and learning process. Despite their struggle against difficulties and problems, they all succeeded to overcome their fear and uneasy feelings towards English texts. It also revealed the students' intention to carry on the learning process by self study to improve their ability in reading Philosophy in English.

Key words: English for Specific Purposes, Philosophy, holistic approach

INTRODUCTION

English playing the role as the global language has an important role in the global communication and in the mastery of a specific subject many of whose text books are written in English. Accordingly, English for Specific Purposes has also been developing to meet the demand of the teaching of English for specific groups with specific purposes. There are, for examples, available materials on the market for teaching English to students of different disciplines or people prepared to function in particular professions and work fields, such as English for tourism, English for engineering, and English for business. Accordingly, studies have been carried out for teaching English to specific groups such as the case studies of *English for the Police*, *English for medical Doctors*, *English for Visual Art Studies* and *English for Thesis Writing* (Basturkmen, 2010, pp 69 - 131). However, not much has been explored or studied in relation to the teaching of English for philosophy, a field of study having much to do with reason and logic. It was brought to my attention when I was assisting a group of students from the Philosophy and Theology Department to improve their reading skills in comprehending philosophy texts in English. An explorative action research was thus carried out to search for the suitable design of an EFL reading course for philosophy and its proper implementation to achieve the goals.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is viewed as "an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need" (Huchinson & Waters, 2008, p. 19). Like any EFL teaching, ESP is primarily concerned with teaching and learning English as a foreign language, which, in this case, share the common characteristics of EFL teaching and learning in general. What differentiates ESP from general EFL program is basically its specific language content to meet particular learners' need. This may explain why ESP "has paid scant attention to the question of how people learn, focusing instead on the question of what people learn" (Huchinson & Waters, 2008, p.2). Focusing on the learners, this study takes into consideration Hutchinson and Waters' "learning-centered approach to ESP" (p.2), which emphasizes "the central importance of the learners and their attitude to learning" (p.8).

How people learn can be viewed in the perspective of educational psychology on theories of learning. Based cognitive code, learners are considered as "thinking beings" (Huchinson & Waters, 2008, p 43), and learning is "a process in which the learners actively try to make sense of data" to arrive at "some sort of meaningful interpretation" (43). Related to this, Roger, with his humanistic approach to education, suggested that "significant learning will only take place when the subject matter is perceived to be of personal relevance to the learner and when it involves active participation by the learner". It was also indicated that "independence, creativity and self-reliance are most likely to flourish in learning situations where external criticism is kept to minimum and where self-evaluation is encouraged" Wiliams and Burden, 2007, p 35).

In line with humanistic approaches, which "emphasize the importance of the inner world of the learner and place the individual thoughts, feelings and emotions at the forefront of all human development"(Williams and Burden, 2007, p.30), Hatchinson and Waters highlight the affective factor viewing learners as "emotional beings', indicating that "the feeling that learning process evokes will have a crucial bearing on the success or failure of the learning". This means that "before the learners can actively think about something" in order to learn as suggested by cognitive theory, "they must want to think about it", which leads to the importance of "the affective factor of motivation" (2008, p 47). In order for learning to take place it is essential that learners have the will to learn, which can be triggered by internal influence, such as "interest or curiosity", the intrinsic motivation, or by the external influence, such as another "person or event", the extrinsic motivation, or triggered by a combination of the internal and external influences. Williams and Burden point out that "motivation is not only simply arousing interest but also sustaining that interest and investing time and energy into putting in the necessary effort

to achieve certain goals". In this case, arousing the learners' interest as" the initiating motivation" needs to be carried over that will move the learners to take action to do something on their own and continue doing it as the "sustaining motivation" (Williams and Burden, 2007, p 121).

Considering the affective sides of the learners, Brown suggested that learners be given "affective support" by some "affective principles", including the "language ego principle" and the one related to confidence, the "I can do it!" principle, or the self esteem principle. The language ego, the "warm and fuzzy" principle requires that "all second language learners need to be treated with affective tender loving care" (2001, p 61). To build or sustain confidence, students need "to hear teacher affirm a belief in the students' ability", which means that the students need to have the teacher give encouragements and express his/her belief in the students that they can learn and make progress to achieve the goals. These affective supports can be regarded the students' affective needs to be considered in the need analysis as "the key feature of ESP" (Basturkmen, 2006, 17), based on which the course syllabus is designed.

Learner needs can be distinguished into "target needs" and "learning needs". Target needs - what the learner needs to do in the target situation - view the target situation in terms of "*necessities*, *lacks* and *wants*"; *necessities* refer to "what the learner has to do in order to function effectively in the target situation", *lacks* are related to what the learner already knows indicating which of the necessities the learner lacks, and *wants* refer to "what the learner view as to what their needs are". It is, thus, necessary to consider the "learning needs, what the learner needs to do in order to learn" (Huchinson & Waters, 2008, pp. 54-56), how the learner can be assisted to learn, employing the available potential, to function properly in the target situation. It is suggested that "the needs, potential and constraints" of the learning situation be taken into account in order to have a fruitful analysis of learner needs (2008, 61).

Another important consideration, in this case, is Vigotsky's widely known concept of the *zone of proximal development*, the "term used to refer to the layer of skill or knowledge which is just beyond that with which the learner is currently of capable of coping" (Williams and Burden,   , p.40). The journey from the present state to the target state has to be digested into small pieces just about right for the learners to cope with, provided with the necessary assistance by the classroom teacher as "scaffolding" (p. 158), providing them with "comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1982, quoted in Basturkmen, 2006, p.90)) "slightly above their level of immediate comprehension", for the learners to advance at their own pace in their learning process.

Following the learning-centered approach to ESP, implemented through the holistic approach, attending to both the cognitive and affective sides of the learners, this ESP classroom research was carried out, from the need analysis, the design of the reading course, syllabus and its implementation to the evaluation. The objectives were to result in a workable reading course that would produce positive effects in assisting the students to enhance their competence in reading philosophical texts in English and get motivated to carry on their ongoing learning.

THE SUBJECTS AND THE NEEDS

The subjects consisted of eight students in the Department of Philosophy and Theology coming from different regions of Indonesia, each with his own education background and experience with learning English as a foreign language. Generally they learned English from their secondary schools, only three started at the primary school. They all had one year learning English at the orientation year before they were admitted to the Department of Philosophy and Theology. In their first semester of study, the time

they started with the study of Philosophy. It was found out they could not perform well in their assignment to read and summarize philosophy material in English.

The need analysis was performed by collecting information about the students and their needs through the Administrator, who had the initiative to start this reading program, the lecturer who was also the Academic Coordinator of the students, and the students themselves, through informal talk, sharing, and personal interviews at different occasions. Formally, there were given the written diagnostic test to find out their English reading proficiency, and questionnaire to find out their experience with reading and English texts, their difficulties/challenges, perception towards their reading competence and towards reading English texts, their purpose in attending the reading course and the effort they plan to carry out to improve their English reading competence.

Generally, they did not have the proper basic reading skills to read general texts in English. This was shown in their pre test result, their perception of their reading competence in English reflected through their answers to the questionnaire filled before the starting point of the reading program. The pre test revealed that there were only two who were scored more than sixty, exactly 68, 72 and 76, whereas the remaining five were scored lower than sixty ranging from 24 to 52. This was strengthened by their low perception of their reading competence in English; there were six who considered themselves having low competence in reading English texts and two having very low competence.

All of the subjects wrote that they liked reading, mostly in Bahasa Indonesia and five read both Indonesian and English reading materials. They consisted of different kinds of reading materials, newspaper, magazine, comics, novels. There were three subjects who liked to read textbooks and one who liked to read books about philosophy humanity. Fifty percent of the subjects liked reading in English. The rest did not like reading in English with various reason given. One stated that he had low basic competence in English, the other one stated that he had not got the appropriate formula to get the meaning of the texts, and the two others considered it difficult to understand the content of the text. All except one stated that they had experienced reading Philosophy texts in English. All of them, accordingly, considered reading Philosophy texts in English difficult, one of them even stated that it was very difficult to read English Philosophy texts. Their difficulties perceived were related to vocabulary (5 subjects), meaning (5 subjects), and sentence patterns (5 subjects). They perceived themselves as incompetent readers in English (6 subjects) and even very incompetent readers (2 subjects)

Despite their perception of their low competence in English as low competent English readers, they all expressed their wish to improve by different efforts; following the reading class (3 subjects), by reading English texts (6 subjects), and by expanding English vocabulary (3 subjects). In following the reading program, they aimed at improving their English proficiency, their English reading skills, and understanding Philosophy texts in English, however one wished to better understand English grammar, another wished to communicate in English well. All these were expressed in their answer to the questionnaire, however, it has to be understood that there were also mixed feelings among themselves when they were informed about the reading program which was compulsory although it was not integrated into the curriculum. To make it worse, the reading class was scheduled Saturday mornings when they usually had their free time.

The need analysis revealed that besides the students' academic needs to develop their reading ability, there were the affective needs to attend to, the needs to be supported, encouraged and motivated, to help enhancing positive perceptions about themselves, about others and about the learning process including towards the English reading texts, as well building their confidence that each had the potential to improve and develop. Particularly, the students needed to get motivated intrinsically to have on-going practice to develop their reading ability. From the academic point of view, they needed some kind of scaffolding

material to get the students familiar with the language used in philosophy writing, with more comprehensible reading from general to Philosophy texts of simpler structural patterns and easier philosophy topics to handle. Tips and guidelines how to read Philosophy could also be beneficial for the students.

THE COURSE DESIGN

The reading program was designed to meet the needs of the students to handle the reading of Philosophy texts in English while giving affective support. The syllabus, which was designed of a wider-angled type (Bastukmen, 2006, pp. 25-26), was not specifically limited to the Philosophy text. Since Philosophy, as "a discipline that exercises reason and logic in an attempt to understand reality and answer fundamental questions about knowledge, life, morality and human nature" (www.whatisphilosophy.net), is usually considered difficult to comprehend, scaffolding material was provided for the students starting from some general reading material which was just above their level. Besides, some reading material on how to read Philosophy, general tips for studying Philosophy obtained from online from different sources was employed to get the students to get familiarized with the specific reading material they had to deal with before they worked with the Philosophy readings on Ethics (edited by Gensler, Spurgin and Swindal, 2005) and finally introducing them to the text suggested by the Administrator. The reading skills developed were previewing, finding the main ideas, supporting details, making inferences and summarizing. Besides, sentence patterns, coordinating, subordinating conjunctions, transitions, referents were included particularly those found in the context of Philosophy reading.

Considering the time limitation and the effects to be carried over after the course, the objectives were realistically set that after completing the 16 week-week reading program, the students were expected to have been motivated to improve their reading comprehension skills, and were able to understand English reading texts of expository types at intermediate level and those related to Philosophy. At the same time, some relevant learning theories discussed previously became the basis in designing a learning-centered reading course and in implementing it. As an on-going process, bits and pieces of information and sources gathered were employed to set up a preliminary course syllabus as a guideline to be reviewed, refined and developed throughout the reading course.

THE IMPLEMENTATION

The course syllabus designed was implemented to attend to both the affective and cognitive sides of the students by creating a conducive learning environment, employing varied kinds of learning activities to promote active participation on the part of the students, and promoting the students' autonomous learning

Creating a conducive learning environment

The sixteen-week program was opened with introduction, providing me the chance to get to know each of the students and to listen to the challenges they faced in trying to comprehend English texts. It was also the moment for the students to get to know me as their instructor, whom they could rely on to get support and assistance in the learning process. The students were then introduced to the reading course and what was expected from them in order to achieve maximal result from the learning process that they could continue after the course.

They were given a chance to share their difficulties and negative feelings about English reading material in Philosophy. Although the students had know one another pretty well living in the same seminary, the chance to share about their perception about their difficulties and feelings about reading English texts was the first time for them. It gave them a chance to know that they were not alone, that they could cooperate and support one another to improve their reading competence. It was important for them to know that the classroom was the place where the students were accepted, appreciated, supported in their learning process. Each would get support from the instructor as well as from his peers. The first meeting was meant to build rapport between me, their instructor and the students and also among the students themselves, which would be further developed in the subsequence meetings.

Considering their perception of their low reading competence coupled by the negative feelings about English texts, certain effort were carried out to build positive perception towards themselves and the learning process. Poems, songs, and inspirational verses were inserted in the learning activities to give encouragement that they had the potential to improve and to build confidence that they could do whatever they wanted to do to improve their reading skills, for which they had to have faith and believe in their own potentials. They were encouraged to like the English reading material and enjoy the reading experience in order to better develop their reading competence.

Engaging students' active participation

Different kinds of learning activities were provided to engage the students in active participation. Besides individual reading, pair work, questions and answers about the reading material, group and class discussion, fun activities like vocabulary games, role playing or reading theater were integrated in the classroom learning activities. Besides, the students listened to songs, read inspirational poems expected to encourage and inspire them. Each activity, particularly the close reading, lasted in a reasonably short period of time considering the students' concentration span. In this way the students were kept alert and engaged in active participation in each meeting of two periods of 50 minutes.

The role playing or reading theater was applied when the students were introduced to the Philosophical dialogue by Plato on *Innate Knowledge: Plato, Meno*, carried out between Socrates, Meno and a slave boy (Cottingham, ed., 1997. pp.3-19). The dialogue was divided into two parts, each assigned to a group of four to prepare for the casting and rehearsing to be practiced also during class hours for clarification of the content, difficult words and for pronunciation practice. A preliminary discussion on the dialogue was carried out before the part was assigned to each group. This role playing gave the students the chance to work in groups to make sense of the dialogue and to cooperate and support one another to rehearse and perform it together. This experience, engaging them in participation both inside and outside class, was also expected as the gate to the reading of other Philosophical dialogues by Plato.

Promoting autonomous learning

The students were encouraged to work autonomously to enrich their vocabulary and carry out extensive reading in their chosen texts. They were assigned to work on the lists of vocabulary in groups and individually. The vocabulary lists consisted of the 2000 most frequent words in English language texts (Mikulecky and Jeffries, pp 303 -307) and the 750 most frequently encountered words in academic texts

(Mikulecky and Jeffries, pp 308-309). Individually they had to look up new words from their extensive reading to be reported in addition to the chosen words from Philosophy text that were assigned for them to read. Extensively, they were free to choose the reading material that they liked. They were provided with different reading material: short stories, magazines, and daily Scripture reading.

This autonomous activity was considered important for the students. By the time they finished the course, they still had several, at least six, semesters ahead where they would be required to read higher level and more complex material of Philosophy readings academically. It was also pointed out to them at the beginning the time limitation of the reading program and the goals they were expected to achieve, which might not be optimally realized in the sixteen-meeting reading program. They were made aware that it needed their cooperation to work outside class during the program and carried over after the completion of the program to keep on developing their reading competence. It was expected that by giving them a favorable experience with the foundation of reading skills and making them be used to working outside the class, the students could have their internal motivation enhanced to maintain their reading habit and develop their reading skills academically.

EVALUATION

The evaluation on the reading program was based on two written tests, one given in the middle of the program and the other towards the end of the program, as well as the students' written reflection submitted one week after the completion of the program. The midterm test showed that almost all had promising result, which was similarly shown in the final written evaluation. This was also shown in the class meetings when they followed the explanation and gave responses to questions about the reading. Academically, all except one performed well at the level appropriate for them to handle.

The students' reflection and self-evaluation gave further insight into the learner process that they had accomplished. There were some points required for the students to write in their reflection on their experience in the Reading Program related to the teaching and learning process, learning activities, difficulties/challenges. Besides the students were asked to self-evaluate and propose a grade they considered they deserved to have. Each gave a more or less complete and genuine reflection, and one even gave a monthly reflection. The written reflection and self-evaluation can be organized into some headings: *the beginning*, *the learning process, the achievement including the proposed score and the future plan.*

The beginning

The subjects started participating the reading course with various kinds of feeling, as revealed in their reflection and self-evaluation, almost all had some kind of negative feelings, pessimistic, lazy even scared and lack confidence that they could learn to improve, except one who had mixed feelings between positive and negative ones, and another one who was enthusiastic with high expectation to improve his English proficiency particularly in speaking, as seen from the following quoted from their reflection:

- *At the beginning I was kind of lazy because I had been bored with the twelve years' learning English, and still were incompetent*
- *At the early stage of the learning process I still felt not confident.*
- *… I sometimes had pessimistic attitude towards the course.*
- *… I was lazy to follow the course, but I had to do it since it was compulsory.*
- *I was scared and did not know how to learn English well.*

- *My first reaction in myself was positive and negative... I had hope to improve my reading skill, to understand and to love English, which will facilitate my study, specifically in understanding Philosophy texts, most of which were in English. Negative, since it would take a lot of my time, particularly, Saturday which was a free day to relax*
- *... I was so happy, because I have a chance to develop my English. One thing which I expected is I can improve my conversation*

Their previous English learning experience seemed to have some impact on them, particularly they were haunted by the complexity and difficulty they had to face in reading English texts and were unsure of the result they could have. Gradually, however, they began to see the benefit of the reading course and were motivated to attend the meetings every week as seen from the following:

- *Through the dynamic process of the first meeting, I began to realize the English course with specific purpose to read English Philosophy text as a need in myself to be able to know and comprehend the reading material in English.*
- *... there were several activities that could enhance my confidence, contribute to building strong mentality, which became an important resource to achieving success in the learning process*

The learning process

During the learning process, there were several difficulties and challenges reflected in the students' writing. The first was related to their perception that English texts were difficult and their perception of their low competence, which became a kind of psychological barrier that made them reluctant to read English texts. Another was their perception of the lack of vocabulary and the way they handled this problem by looking up the meaning in the dictionary every time they encountered a new vocabulary item, which made the reading experience a boring one and made them stop before finishing reading. Externally, this was complicated by the complex sentence patterns which made it difficult for them to read. Furthermore, the content of the subject matter could also be difficult and confusing for the students to comprehend by themselves. In addition, they had to face the difficulty of managing their time between the reading course and their academic and seminary assignments. These were expressed in the students' reflective writing:

- *... the difficulty that I experienced was the psychological factor; whenever I was facing texts in foreign language, my thought was full of the word "difficult" ... so everything became difficult*
- *"... this made me keep opening the dictionary every time I read ... which made tired and bored before finishing reading".*
- *"I could understand general texts in English, but when I had to face Philosophy texts I had difficulty because of the complex sentence patters ... the content was sometimes confusing"*
- *... sometimes I had difficulty to make time for the reading course due to the assignments of the department and the seminary ... reading course became number two ...*

Along the process, some of them had to struggle against their internal problem to follow the class meetings, do the assignment, and keep trying to be faithful to their commitment towards the reading course that they could finish it well. Despite all the challenges, they all stayed to the end and made progress in overcoming their negative feelings and developed a kind of positive attitude towards the learning process and tried to improve their reading abilities. Particularly, the songs and encouraging verses also produced certain effect.

- *This reading course is seen as a way to achieve my goals to comprehend English reading texts*

- *The meetings in the first month motivated me to become more optimistic in the reading course... to learn and make sense of English texts ... as a process to love reading English texts, new vocabulary, and not to feel alienated ... particularly towards Philosophy material.*
- *... it needed hard work due to the limited vocabulary which became a hindrance, however, the frequent reading and looking up in the dictionary for new unknown words helped me to begin to make sense...*
- *... I did not give up with this situation ... if I can and want to develop ... this is the beginning process ... gradually I must be capable of it.*
- *Gradually I became interested in reading English texts. ... and began to like it.*
- *The song I have a dream had at least inspired me ... to have a dream in life ... and in learning English. I need to have positive attitude that I can. I myself need to have a dream and be optimistic because all these involve me as a subject who has to experience*

Once the students began to try to deal with their negative feelings and overcome them, they started to open themselves to the learning process and made some progress. It was revealed in their writing that through different kinds of learning activities and exercises, they learned to better understand Philosophy texts in English and could immediately find the main ideas of each reading. In addition they learned to develop their vocabulary.

- *The exercises and learning material like vocabulary building, identifying the sentence structure, the type of sentences, the referents, inferring meaning from the context, extensive reading, helped me much in understanding English Philosophy texts*
- *I could understand more English vocabulary.*
- *... made it easier to comprehend English texts and hot the main idea immediately ...*

The achievement

Most of the students succeeded in overcoming their internal problems with their negative feelings towards the English reading texts and towards their potential to learn to improve. They had more positive attitude towards reading English texts and learned to love the activity and develop the reading habit to be maintained after the course.

- *... I became to like reading English texts ... making it easier to comprehend ...*
- *I became more confident of myself and dare to face English texts, although I was not fluent in reading*
- *... to build new habit reading one paragraph of Philosophy text every day*

Overcoming their internal problems was one of the important achievements if not the most important one since this would contribute to their intrinsic motivation that would bring effect on them to take action to read. As revealed in the students' writing based on their reflection, they planned to continue their effort to improve their abilities in reading English reading texts, specifically those related to their field of study:
- *... my great interest to develop my competence is as my resource to keep exercising. At least, I want to spare my time really practice reading English Philosophy texts four times a week*
- *... From this course I also became aware that there is no ending to learning process... learning also makes one become wiser in front of God and others*
- *... I want to plan my own program to increase my vocabulary ...*
- *... to work harder and continue to struggle ...*
- *... ideally I would like to have reading rhythm routinely ... one commitment that I would keep is to keep learning and developing myself ...*

- *… through this course I found the new meaning through my reflection about life and learning …*
- *… this is the homework for me. Learning is never end"*

All the students except one had positive tone in their reflection regarding their achievement including the one who had to really struggle hard in following and accomplishing the learning process. The one who did not really have positive tone was not really satisfied with the course since he had higher expectation than just developing reading competence starting from the level considered lower that he had expected. However, he was also aware that he had to adjust himself to his peers' learning level and showed good cooperation in the learning process. The grades they proposed were not much different from the final grade as seen in the appendix. By proposing reasonably high grades for themselves, the students showed that they were confident of their capability in accomplishing the reading course. This was supported by the scores they achieved in the written mid-test and final examination, showing that they had performed well in the learning process.

CONCLUSION

The reading program was designed to meet both the students' academic and personal, affective needs. It was, thus, implemented holistically, attending to the learners' cognitive as well as affective sides by creating a conducive learning environment, engaging the students in active participation through varied kinds of learning activities and promoting autonomous learning. These seemed to produce promising results viewed from the students' written reflection and self-evaluation in addition to their performance in the written evaluation.

Reflecting on the whole process from the starting point to gather information, sources and material to design and redesign the reading course, the implementation in the week to week meeting until the final stage, and particularly the students' reflective writing gave the indication that the reading course had provided the students some material and learning activities that brought some positive effects on the students academically and personally. In addition, it gave a valuable lesson that more competent students should also be accommodated to achieve something more, while slower learners should be given more assistance to learn and perform better. The students' plan to maintain and continue their learning to read English Philosophy reading also encourages an on-going search for the improvement of reading program for Philosophy.

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