

# Using DRTA Strategy to Overcome EFL Students' Problems in Reading Literature in English

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*Abstract: Reading literature in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a challenging task for EFL learners. The activity is difficult because it is related to a learner's ability to read, understand, and make interpretations of the text written in English. In addition, it involves interest and appreciation for literature in English. Research on reading comprehension has shown that reading strategies affect students' reading comprehension of texts. The DRTA is one such reading strategy that can be used to help EFL students read texts written in English with comprehension. This paper describes the DRTA strategy as used in a senior classroom of Indonesian EFL students reading a literature text in English. The five stages of the DRTA that were used were: identifying purpose, adjusting rate to purposes and material, observing reading, developing comprehension, and developing fundamental skills. Recommendations are provided for effective future use of the strategy in teaching reading in an EFL context.*

Keywords: DRTA Strategy, Reading Literature in English, EFL Students

## Introduction

**THIS PAPER PROVIDES** a description of an activity using the DRTA strategy in helping English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to enhance their understanding of literature written in English. Most foreign language teachers attest to the fact that many EFL students find reading English literature difficult and challenging. In EFL pedagogy, teachers are often encouraged to first diagnose reading difficulties in EFL reading to provide students with the necessary remedial strategies to help them read with comprehension, and eventually to read with enjoyment. A number of studies have shown that many EFL students face problems in reading in English. Nuttall (2005) pointed out that EFL readers who are not good readers may be caught in the vicious cycle of reading in English. This occurs in a product-focused approach to reading whereby readers who read slowly often do not enjoy reading, and thus do not read much which further leads to little understanding of what is read.

Lazar (1994) observed that learners' low level English competence or English proficiency is a major obstacle for EFL learners in learning literature. There are cases where the learners who do not read literature in their own language, or whose language has a literature very distinct from the literature in English, remain mystified or intimidated by the formal properties of the literary texts. Without any interpretations of the texts' meanings, the learners become demotivated and frustrated in learning the language because of working with such texts. Akyel and Yalcin (1990) found that many EFL teachers chose to expose their students to literature to achieve linguistic and cultural goals and to develop their students' literary

competence while other teachers failed to perceive the significance of the literature syllabus in meeting the language proficiency needs of students. These teachers seemed to be unaware of how literature materials can help improve students' proficiency in the language. Akyel and Yalcin (1990) also found that the students' attitudes toward literature were related to their foreign language proficiency. Students who felt that they had a very good command of English seemed to appreciate the literature, whereas a majority of the students found many literary works not only boring, but also too long and very difficult to comprehend. Similarly, Martin and Laurie (1993) reported that some foreign language students did not necessarily find literature study conducive to achieving their primary goal of improving skills in the target language. Given all the preceding problems, it can be assumed that reading literary works in English might be a source of anxiety and frustration to a majority of EFL students which could demotivate them to read literature in English.

Alwasilah (2004) in the *Jakarta Post* (national news daily) states that a possible problem faced by EFL students, especially Indonesian students, in reading literature is the difficulty relating to globalization. He pointed out that despite the assumed positive effects of globalization, it does not necessarily generate any integrated or hybrid culture that improves the quality of traditional cultures. In fact, he asserted that it has subtly marginalized the function of local literature in developing society. This contention partly explains why some ethnic literature (Indonesian literature) written in English or even English literature itself is not fully appreciated in schools. In the Indonesian context, as a matter of fact, long before globalization issues surfaced about 10-15 years ago, Indonesian and English literature in general had already been marginalized.

Alwasilah further adds that many educators, and especially decision-makers, underestimate the significance of literature. Literature extends beyond the esthetic realm although empirical knowledge may be acquired through reading novels, short stories, folklore, poetry, and so on. Collie and Slater (1987) stressed the positive contributions language learning through literature could make in that a literary text constituted valuable authentic material as it exposes the learner to different registers and types of language use. Thus, fiction is sometimes a more valuable source of information about the natural world than scientific textbooks. When textbooks fail to arouse students' curiosity about science, literature may be a solution. Although English and Indonesian literatures are not adequately appreciated in high schools, they can be incorporated into English classes and other foreign language classes. In learning to appreciate foreign literature, students can at the same time enhance their awareness and appreciation of ethnic and Indonesian literature.

To assist the EFL learners in learning literature in English, Graves (2004) argued that a process-focused approach to literature learning acts as an important contributor to their reading proficiency. Thus, the knowledge of learners' current process-focused view could be one important factor for English teachers in helping to improve students' reading skill. By investigating the students' reading process, teachers can learn a great deal about how their students approach reading. Teachers could also help students to increase reading frequency and expose students to new types of reading materials.

The interest of some researchers to investigate the significance of a process-focused view of reading as opposed to a product-focused approach, reflects the serious effort they are making in seeking for a tool that could tap into such processes, to reveal all possible thoughts generated in the readers' minds when performing reading tasks. Such an approach is designed

to scaffold students' efforts in their reading and understanding of various texts, help them grow in their literacy skills, and nurture positive attitude about reading.

Graves (2004) described a process-focused approach to reading as involving a reading process with different content such as reading books, literary works, newspapers, magazines, and various documents of various kinds. Graves lists three frameworks – the directed reading activity (DRA), the directed reading thinking activity (DRTA), and scaffolded reading experience (SRE) – which can be implemented with students at all grade levels. Two of the frameworks, guided reading and four blocks reading, are designed primarily for beginning readers in grades 1 through 3.

Durkin (2004) mentioned that the process-focused approach has been characterized as intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader. It has a great impact on students' reading comprehension process. In this approach the active role of students is crucial if they are to succeed in comprehending. That role underlies the interactive process during which readers construct meaning.

This paper describes the DRTA strategy which was used with 35 Indonesian students learning literature written in English. The DRTA strategy used is similar to work done by Judy Banett (1978, cited in Reutzel & Robert, 1992) whereby the DRTA strategy was used in the short story entitled "*Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*". The DRTA was used in such a way as to sample the most important elements of a narrative, mainly elements of a story grammar or map (Beck and McKeown, 1981 cited in Reutzel and Robert, 1992). These elements include setting, characters, initiating events, problems, attempts to solve problems, outcomes or resolutions. In the DRTA conducted with the Indonesian students, the process-focused approach was used to help the students overcome problems in reading literature in English. The purpose for reading was linked to the text read and to the students' skills and interests (Graves, 2004).

Teachers can use process-focused approach such as the DRTA strategy to construct their own comprehension questions for literature texts to help students understand better what they are reading. In addition, the DRTA strategy can be used to analyze instructional materials and to develop materials to ensure that the various forms of questions are used to help students respond to them with understanding.

To make reading more appealing, teachers need to show students how useful and attractive strategies can be if they know the appropriate strategy to use. The DRTA can be applied at the pre reading, while reading, and post reading stages of a reading lesson. Practice exercises on how to read effectively can be carried out by applying the DRTA. In this paper, the focus is on the procedure developed by Ruddell (2005) which involves five concrete reading stages or steps: (a) Step one: identifying purposes of reading/ thinking which comprises speculation and conjecture, confirmation and redirection, data collection and analysis, final speculation and summarizing, and decision-making; (b) Step two: adjusting rate to purposes and material, which is made up of rate and flow information and rate adjustment; (c) Step three: observing reading; (d) Step four: developing comprehension; and (e) Step five: developing fundamental skills.

## **The DRTA Strategy**

The Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA) was introduced by Russel Stauffer in 1969 as a means of developing reading comprehension. It has, over the years, received renewed

attention and recommendations as an effective means of facilitating students' comprehension (Gillet & Temple, 2000; Tierney & Pearson, 1992; Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 2000). A longitudinal study by Stauffer, Hammond, Oehlkers, and Housemen (1997) found that DRTA participants made statistically significant higher achievement gains in reading comprehension and word study on the Stanford Achievement Test in first and second grade when compared to the control group. Reutzel and Hollingsworth (1991) found that there was no significant difference between first graders in DL/RTA (Directed Listening/Reading Thinking Activity) group and those in the literature webbing group with regard to answering comprehension questions about the story. Ruddell (2002:121) proposed the DRTA as an activity which has a clear purpose for reading, involves students in active comprehension by calling on their personal background knowledge and text knowledge, develops higher level thinking using predictions and speculations, fosters reading to verify, revise predictions or form new ones, and teaches the skill of making conclusions, uses the social dynamics of group interaction to propose and discuss options and outcomes, and helps students arrive at decisions based on textual and personal knowledge. Ruddell (2002, 2005) and Sthal (2008) concur that DRTA is a useful strategy not only in assisting students to read narrative texts, but also expository, argumentative, and descriptive texts.

### **Using DRTA in Teaching Reading of Literature in English**

A DRTA is relatively easy to prepare. The most difficult part of preparation is deciding where to place stop-points in the lesson sequence, and for novice DRTA teachers, the tendency is to stop more often than necessary, as opposed to less. The only other parts is learning to ask open-ended and DRTA-type questions rather than lots of literal questions, and becoming used to lesson episodes in which students do most of the talking (Ruddell, 2005).

Ruddell (2005) offers a useful suggestion for teachers in using the DRTA. When the English teacher first begins using a DRTA strategy, s/he may want to use it simply to intro-duce students to their homework reading assignment. Teachers can ask students to make predictions from the title and the first and second paragraphs, record the predictions, and use them for opening a discussion in the next day's lesson. Later, when both teacher and students are comfortable with this kind of questioning, the students can be led on to read the full text. The following are steps on conducting a DRTA approach:

1. Select the reading assignment (e.g. poetry, short story, folk tale)
2. Determine stop points. For instance, ask the students to stop first after the title. Then, use logical breaks, such as subheadings, chapter parts, and so forth to establish three or four additional stops.
3. Prepare questions to be asked at stop-points. For example, "Based on the title, what do you think the story or poem will be about? Why? Now what do you think? What do you think we'll learn or find out next? Why?"
4. Obtain/prepare cover sheets for students to use to cover text following stop-points (if needed).

The following section of this paper provides a description of the DRTA strategy as used with a group of EFL learners in West Sumatra using a local Indonesian folk tale called "The Legend of Sangkuriang". The DRTA strategy was chosen for a number of reasons. First, it

is a simple instructional strategy. In other words, it focuses on process which directly relates to the critical component of comprehension and stimulates full, rich understanding of text. Second, it is adaptable to many text styles. For instance, Ruddell (2005) used it to teach English texts in science and English lessons. Third, it can accommodate wide cultural, lan-guage and literacy differences that students bring to the EFL classroom and serves as support for students in constructing new knowledge.

A total of 35 students were involved in the DRTA-led English lesson. There were 24 female students (68.6%) and 11 male students (31.4%). The ethnic groups comprised Minang, Java, and Batak. The detailed breakdown of the different ethnic groups is as displayed in Table 1. The students' English language proficiency were categorized as high proficiency (14.3%; n=5), average proficiency (34.3%; n=12), and low proficiency levels (51.4%; n=18).

**Table 1: Profile of Students**

Category	Sample	
	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	N	%
Males	24	68.6
Females	11	31.4
<b>Total</b>	35	100
<b>Ethnic Group</b>	N	%
Minang	33	94.4
Java	1	2.8
Batak	1	2.8
Others	0	0
<b>Total</b>	35	100.0
<b>Proficiency Level</b>	N	%
High	5	14.3
Average	12	34.3
Low	18	51.4
<b>Total</b>	35	100.00

The following is a description of the use of the DRTA in a sample lesson on reading literature in English.

**DRTA Strategy - Excerpt from an English Lesson**

Class level:	Senior English class (Intermediate level)
Topic:	Local Folklore entitled “The Legend of Sangkuriang”
Time:	60 minutes
<b>Pre-reading Stage:</b>	
Teacher gives instructions to students on how to approach the text.	
Teacher:	I’m going to give you a blank sheet of paper to be used as a cover sheet. Please turn to page 45 of your book. Cover everything in the passage except the title and author of the story. Teacher further facilitates reading the literary text by guiding the students through the reading process using prompts and questions.
Teacher:	Based on the title, what do you think the story will be about?

**Student 1:** About a child who’s doing something that’s not particularly acceptable or something outside the ordinary.

**Teacher:** Why do you say that?

**Student 1:** Well, because my mother ever told it when I was in my elementary school. I really like it teacher.

**Teacher:** Very good. Who is Sangkuriang?

**Student 1:** If I am not wrong, he was a child who lived separated from his family since he was child.

**Teacher:** Yes, you are right. And he is closely related with Tangkuban Perahu mountain. Yes? What were you going to say?

**Student 2:** I was thinking about the story of formation of the Tangkuban Perahu volcano began with a young man Sangkuriang.

**Teacher:** Why?

**Student 2:** Because of the word “the legend”.

**Teacher:** The word “legend” in the title? Okay. That’s an interesting idea. What else? Does anyone know this story? Any other ideas?

**Student 3:** I am thinking of something happened long time ago.

**Teacher:** An ancient event? Any other thoughts?

**Student 4:** I think that Sangkuriang had a close relationship with this legend.

The first paragraph:

One day, while he was hunting, Sangkuriang accidentally killed his beautiful black dog (called Si TUMANG). This dog is actually Sangkuriang's father who had been condemned to live the life of a dog by his GURU. However, Sangkuriang never knew that.

While-reading stage:

Teacher	(This is done once students have completed reading.) Now what do you think?
Student 1	It is all about Sangkuriang.
Teacher	Yes, it's about Sangkuriang. What else?
Student 1	Uha ....Sangkuriang has a beautiful black dog which was called SI TUMANG. Unfortunately, he had accidentally killed it.
Teacher	Who was SI TUMANG?
Student 1	It had some kind of connection to this little boy. SI TUMANG was his father who ever condemned being a black dog.
Teacher	Does he know that?
Student 2	No... teacher. I am sure that someone did not tell him. That's why he killed it.
Teacher	How do you know that Sangkuriang never knew that?
Student 2	Because of the word never in the sentence... he never knew it.
Teacher	Great!...now, go ahead and read the next four paragraphs.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> paragraphs:

Sangkuriang had been separated by his mother since childhood. Yet, he was destined to meet his mother again. When on his way home, he stopped at a small village and met and fell in love with a beautiful girl. He didn't realize that the village was his homeland nor that the beautiful girl was his own sacred mother (remain young & pretty).

Their love grew naturally and one day, when they were discussing their wedding plans, Dayang Sumbi suddenly realized that the profile of Sangkuriang's head matched that of her only son's who had left twenty years earlier. How could she marry her own son? But she did not wish him to be disappointed by cancelling the wedding. So, although she agreed to marry Sangkuriang, she would do so only on the condition that he provided her with a lake and a boat with which they could sail on the dawn of their wedding day.

Sangkuriang accepted this condition and built a lake by damming the Citarum river. With a dawn just moment away and the boat almost complete, Dayang Sumbi realized that Sangkuriang would fulfill the condition she had set. With a wave of her supernatural shawl, she lit up the eastern horizon with flashes of light. Deceived by false dawn, the cock crowed and farmers rose for the new day.

With his work not yet complete, Sangkurinag realized that his endeavor were lost. With all his anger, he kicked the boat that he himself had built. The boat fell over and, in so doing become the mountain TANGKUBAN PARAHU (in Sundanese, TANGKUBAN means upturned or upside down, and PARAHU means boat). With the dam torn asunder, the water drained from the lake becoming a wide plain and nowadays became a city called BANDUNG (from the word BENDUNG, which means Dam).

[Source: *INDONESIA: TANGKUBAN PARAHU Booklet*, published by PERUM PERHUTANI UNIT III - JAWA BARAT, KPH BANDUNG UTARA. Jl. Cirebon No. 4-A. Telephone: (022)-771142, Bandung].



The end of the story can be followed by follow-up activities such as retelling the story, answering questions, and other similar comprehension-focused activities. The following are the steps in the DRTA strategy as was applied to the above short story in the English lesson. The procedure of the DRTA is taken from Ruddell (2005).

## **Steps of the DRTA**

### **Step One: Identifying Purposes for Reading**

As conducted in the lesson described above, the DRTA begins with students setting individual and group purposes for reading. It involves five stages. Stage 1 is the *Identifying Purposes for Reading*. In this stage, the teacher creates inter-textual text links by combining students' schemata or prior knowledge with the information in the text selection after reading the title (*Sangkuriang*). To emphasize the purpose of reading, the teacher asks the students to predict by confirming the given contexts. This stage is marked by identification of facts and details that do or do not support the earlier speculation or prediction (*the legend*). Then the teacher raises new questions, and determines whether the new information needs to be revised (*why do you say that?*).

### **Step Two: Adjusting Rate to Purposes and Material**

The activity began with small bits of information and increased to larger amounts. This acts as an introduction to the text. In this stage, the first stop-point occurs quickly following a title or opening line. Thus, the students are invited to make a little bit of prediction which may be good, hearty, or funny. The second stop-point involves giving one or sometimes two paragraphs to be read. In the legend of Sangkuriang, the teacher provided the students with an introductory paragraph only and then confirms them with what they have. The last stage is reading much longer texts between stop-points. Here, the teacher can give the students the rest of the paragraphs. This is necessary because it helps improve the student's reading ability in gaining the meaning from the text or short story. Rate adjustment can be seen when students skim quickly through the section to get a general idea of the content to fill in the details because they know they will be asked to support any conclusions drawn from the text. Other students may read carefully from the start and go back later to scan the text for ideas that reinforce or support their opinions.

### **Step Three: Observing the Reading**

The teacher gives a certain amount of guided silent reading that needs to be done in class. The teacher's observation during that reading yields much valuable information about students' silent reading abilities and allows her to help those students who need immediate help. If possible, this can be done either in a small group or with individual students. This way, the teacher will be able to identify quickly which students are fast and slow readers.

### **Step Four: Developing Comprehension**

One of the integral parts of DRTA is developing comprehension. It includes the combination of students' prior knowledge and new information to make predictions, to read to confirm

or adjust predictions, and finally to draw conclusions and make speculations during class discussions. There are two kinds of questions to be applied at this stage. They are:

- Examples of questions that require speculation, prediction, and critical analysis.

“With a title like that (*the legend of Sangkuriang*)...”

“What do you think the story will be about?” “Now, what do you think?”

“What do you think will happen next?”

“Anything else?”

“Any other ideas?”

“What else? Does anyone know this story? “Any other ideas?”

- Example of questions that require drawing conclusions and/or providing support.

“What makes you say that?”

“Why?”

“How do you know that?”

“Who is Sangkuriang?”

“Why do say that?”.

### **Step Five: Developing Fundamental Skills**

Once reading has been completed, the teacher directs the class in developing skills that are suitable to students' needs and instructional goals. The activity should not really require them to write answers to literal questions about what they have just read and discussed. The quality of the class discussion and the level of understanding students have achieved are already beyond the literal comprehension level. Additional activities should be given to the students to improve their reading ability such as in the form of vocabulary study, activities to organize and combine information, any of numerous writing activities, and retelling the story.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to report an alternative approach to address problems encountered by students reading literature in EFL by using the DRTA strategy. Based on the theories and discussions above, it can be suggested that the DRTA strategy can be used to help enhance students' reading comprehension at all levels, especially for those who are learning literature in English. To help students become better readers, teachers need to focus on process-oriented approaches to reading. This involves emphasizing appropriate methods, class atmosphere and syllabus which are reflected in practice opportunities (interactive activities in the classroom). Using a process-approach to comprehension, teachers are able to probe into students' understanding or misunderstanding of the reading. Effective interactive activities in reading literature in EFL should be manipulative, meaningful, and communicative, in-volving learners in reading for a variety of reading purposes. Specifically, reading activities should (1) be based on authentic or naturalistic source materials; (2) enable learners to ma-nipulate and practice specific features of language /literacy works; (3) allow learners to re-

hearse, in class, communicative skills they need in the real world; and (4) include activities that reflect active psycholinguistic processes of learning. In summary, the DRTA strategy encourages a dynamic group reading activity in which students interact with the teacher and other students to create meaning of what has been read.

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