Using Support Reading to raise Reading Fluency in a Grade 9 class taking EFL – An Action Research

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Abstract— This action research explores the use of Supported Reading (SR) to improve the reading proficiency of Grade 9 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in an Indonesian context. A class of 16 students were involved in this study conducted over 3 weeks. The intervention addressed the students' ability and reluctance to read or speak in English through a structured SR routine, incorporating various reading practices. The research questions focused on the current state of reading proficiency and the effectiveness of SR as an intervention. Baseline and post-intervention reading tests were conducted, and statistical analysis indicated a significant improvement in students' reading scores. The methodology incorporated elements of language testing, using a reading fluency test with a designed rubric. The intervention included vocal warm-ups, silent reading, word attack drills, echo reading, choral reading, and pair/individual reading activities. The results showed a significant increase in fluency, rhythm, expression, and pronunciation skills among the students. Findings suggest that SR, typically considered for lower grades, is a viable intervention even at the upper grades, serving as a form of spiral progression. The study affirms that SR is relevant and useful for EFL teaching and learning. Recommendations include integrating SR into reading instructions for students and in teacher professional development programs. While SR is commonly used in lower primary for reading fluency, educators facing similar challenges in EFL contexts should consider the use of SR to improve reading proficiency and motivation among students in the upper grades.

Keywords— Action Research, Reading Fluency Test, Reading Intervention, Reading Proficiency, Supported Reading

I. INTRODUCTION

I teach English at a local private school in Medan as a volunteer. In November this year, I was asked to co-teach with another teacher (Lina). Teacher Lina has asked if I could help motivate her Grade 9 students because they feel discouraged when it comes to learning English. I agreed and we discussed the profile of this class, and what problems she faced.

Teacher Lina shared that there are sixteen students – 12 girls and 4 boys. Most of them are highly motivated, talkative, and participative in all subjects, except English. During English, they are reluctant, reticent, and restless.

Students are reluctant to read or speak in English. They are quiet during lessons, and as a result, Teacher Lina uses Bahasa Indonesia during her English lessons. Students would respond to her questions in Bahasa Indonesia.

Teacher Lina explains that the students are restless because they are frustrated with themselves for not doing well in English. She proposed that I taught them to read aloud as that would be a good way to get them to be more vocal and participative in class.

After my discussion with Teacher Lina, I visited her class to build rapport with the students. I was also on a fact-finding mission to understand the students' needs and

reasons for their frustration, and why they found English difficult. I explained my purpose to these students, interviewed them and did a baseline reading test. After the meeting, I sat down with Teacher Lina to confirm my observations, and we decided to go ahead with reading aloud.

I am in Medan because I am studying in the Doctoral Program of English Applied Linguistics (Research Program) at the State University of Medan. I take a course called Language Testing, and in one assignment, each of us must undertake a mini-research and on how the principles of Language Testing can be applied. I decided to take the opportunity to apply what I have learnt in Language Testing and its related practices to the teaching of English reading aloud to these students. Perhaps through these principals, I could find ways to help them learn English better.

II.   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research questions (RQ) are as follows:

RQ1: What is the current state of reading proficiency in Grade 9 students studying in an EFL context, and how will Supported Reading be a suitable intervention to improve their reading proficiency?

RQ2: Why will Supported Reading work or not work?

III.   LITERATURE REVIEW

I have explained why I wanted to teach English reading aloud to a Grade 9 class, and in the following paragraphs, I will give an overview of what Supported Reading (SR) is. I will also make links to what I have learnt in Language Testing.

Past research indicates that reading and speaking fluency are critical components of language proficiency (Nation, 2009; Brown, 2007). Challenges in teaching EFL in Indonesia include pronunciation difficulties and the double-bind dilemma of policy and practice (Crichton, 2014; Tilaar, 2012). Despite existing language curriculum and instructional efforts from Grade 1, even at Grade 9, students in Indonesian schools often face challenges in attaining optimal speaking proficiency. Teacher Lina's class is a good example of this. This problem can be seen at two levels, namely, students and teachers:

(1) Students do not speak fluently; many words are mispronounced; they do not have sufficient vocabulary; and they do not have confidence to carry on a basic conversation in English.

(2) Teachers are at a loss because they are also not fluent in English. They realize that they are not good model speakers in class. They wish that there is a systematic way to teach and assess speaking in class to show that their students are improving.

To summarize, if I have been successful in teaching reading aloud to Grade 9 students, and they have learnt how to read aloud proficiently, then it must show in better reading scores, higher level of motivation, and greater sense of confidence. For this action research, I will focus on better reading scores through administering a reading test before and after intervention.

3.1 Using Supported Reading (SR)

SR is a pedagogical routine in which teachers spend instructional time addressing processing issues and difficulties that students may have with challenging texts. The goal is to build student familiarity with a chosen text to help them work more efficiently and effectively with its ideas.

SR can be used with the whole class or with small targeted groups of readers you wish to accelerate. The SR routine uses repeated readings practices (Rasinksi, 2010; Samuels, 2002) in combination to provide a variety of ways to access the words on the page. First the teacher previews the text, and checks for parts of the text in which students might face difficulties with. Next, through a combination of practices including reading aloud, choral, echo, paired and individual reading, the teacher help students develop familiarity with the text and its challenges.

Reading research indicates that fluency is a key component of skilled reading and that it is often given scant attention in classrooms, particularly after Year 4 (Mostert & Glasswell, 2011). Many students who read below grade level get little out of interactions with texts that are simply too difficult for them to read alone. An overload on processing attention makes it hard for them to think while reading, and so they often do poorly on independent tasks and assessments.

3.2 Using A Reading Fluency Test

Fluent oral reading has been defined as "accurate reading of connected text at a conversational rate with appropriate prosody or expression" (Hudson, Mercer, & Lane, 2000, as cited in Hudson, Lane & Pullen, 2005, p. 702). The National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHHD], 3, 2000) also defined fluent readers as those who can read accurately, at an appropriate rate, and with proper expression.

Research by Barth, et. al. (2012) have shown high reliability and validity of oral reading fluency scores

among middle grade readers when using texts that are designed properly. I followed the procedure set out by previous researchers like Gunning (2016) and Hudson, et. al. (2005) and Salim (2012) to establish validity and reliability of reading tests.

Firstly, I worked with Teacher Lina to design a reading passage that students would find relevant and interesting. Next, I subjected the reading passage to the Flesch Kincaid Readability Ease to determine if it is within the ability of most of the Grade 9 students (See Appendix 1). Finally, I developed a Reading Rubric to measure that reading fluency of the students. This in line with the research by Benjamin, R. A. (2012) and Crichton, J. (2014).

For the design of the rubric, I followed the work of reputable researchers in using a level-rating system for rhythm, expression, and intonation (Benjamin & Schwanenflugel, 2010; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006; 2008). These researchers described reading characterized by prosody that is associated with high levels of reading comprehension. In this mini-research, I developed a 5-point scale (See Appendix 2).

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the school does not conduct reading tests for assessments (formative and summative). Secondly and consequently, students are not used to being assessed formally in reading. So I created a rubric that was simple enough to be understood by students, so that they could understand what the success criteria for fluent reading were. Students indicated that they understood the rubric and were motivated to achieve 5-point mark.

IV.   METHODOLOGY

4.1 Why I chose action research

I mentioned earlier that I adopted an action research approach to teacher Grade 9 students how to read aloud. Action research is a systematic, reflective, and collaborative inquiry approach employed by practitioners to address real-world problems within their own context (Lewin, 1946). It involves a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, with the aim of improving practices and achieving positive change (Stringer, 2013). I only had a short time-frame of 3 to 4 weeks to conduct this research and so an action research approach was most appropriate.

4.2 How I gathered initial data

I also mentioned that I interviewed the students and did a baseline reading test. This is because the action research process involves identifying a problem or area for improvement, collecting relevant data through various

methods, implementing interventions or changes, and then reflecting on the outcomes to inform further actions. This iterative process fosters a dynamic and participatory approach, allowing practitioners to adapt and refine their strategies based on ongoing feedback and reflection (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

In the interview with the students, I asked for a finger-survey. Students indicated with a show of fingers that their confidence was between 1 and 3 (1 being lowest; 5 being highest). The majority was in the range of 1 to 2 range, with two girls at 3. When asked, they agreed with the teacher that they were frustrated and unmotivated because:

a) They find English words too difficult to pronounce and they do not know if they are saying it right or wrong since there was no one to correct them

b) They are embarrassed about making mistakes, and that people would laugh at them, especially the teacher

I did a baseline reading test. This was a passage that Teacher Lina and I crafted together (Appendix 1). At the time of the research, they were studying present continuous tense as part of the National Syllabus, and I wanted to make sure that I helped to keep pace with their learning, and not interrupt the coverage of syllabus. I also designed a rubric for the reading test (Appendix 2) and scored each student against it.

4.3 How I used Supported Reading in my intervention

For three weeks, I visited Grade 9 class on Mondays and Wednesday to teach reading aloud. Each lesson lasted 1.5 hours. In total, I spent 9 hours teaching reading aloud. For every lesson, I used the following lesson sequence:

Duration	Lesson sequence	Rationale
05 min	Check-in	Start of lesson
10 min	Vocal warm-up	To build team spirit and loudness in a fun, rewarding way
05 min	Silent reading	Chance for students to rehearse quietly
10 min	Word attack	Repeat difficult words or sentences
15 min	Echo Read	Teacher modelling and student imitate
10 min	Song Request	Reward time with rest and fun where students sing songs that they like in either in English or

		Bahasa
15 min	Choral Read	Students do it together while teacher guides
15 min	Pair/Individual Read	Students do it on their own while teacher praises
10 min	Reflection	Feedback and confidence check
05 min	Closure	End of lesson and positive reinforcement

4.4 How I used Language Testing in my intervention

As mentioned earlier, in my first week, I conducted a pre-test for 16 students. This testing was done in class, where each student read 3 paragraphs of the text. Based on the Reading Rubric I gave a score for each of the categories, namely, Fluency and Rhythm, Expression, and Pronunciation. Then I totaled up the marks out of 15.

On the third week, I gave a post-test for 16 students again. I used the same reading passage as in the pre-test to maintain consistency of test item. This testing was done in class, where students took turns to read in pairs. Each student read an alternative paragraph, and they exchanged turns. This means both students got to read all 3 paragraphs but they did it in pairs. There is a reason why I changed this in the post-test.

Firstly, when I first started teaching them, students gave feedback to Teacher Lina and me that they felt shy, did not feel confident, and were anxious about reading in front of the teacher. Secondly, when Teacher Lina and I probed further, students said that they felt judged and were worried that the teachers might not have a good impression of them after that. I wanted to mitigate this fear so that the students' performance was more reflective of their true reading ability.

Finally, students suggested that if they could read with a friend, they would be safer and more comfortable. It would also motivate not to be afraid to make mistakes to know that someone else was also going to make mistakes together. That was how I ended testing students in pairs during the post-test. They read the same passage as the pre-test. However, when I scored them, I was still using the same Reading Rubric, and scoring them individually.

V.   RESULTS & DISCUSSION

At the start of my action research, my research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What is the current state of reading proficiency in Grade 9 students studying in an EFL context, and how will SR be a suitable intervention to improve their reading proficiency?

RQ2: Why will SR work or not work?

To answer RQ1, I conducted a baseline reading test with a reading passage (Appendix 1) to find the current state of reading proficiency. During the research, I intervened with a lesson sequence to support reading aloud. After the intervention, I used the same reading passage and conducted a post-test.

For analysis, I used a single sample paired T-test, which is a common statistical test for this type of analysis. The two-tail test for a single sample with pre-test and post-test results is used to assess whether there is a significant change or difference between the two measurements.

5.1 Calculation and Analysis

I used a two-tailed test to calculate the t-value of pre- and post-test scores, with n=16; α (alpha)=0.05. Findings suggest a significant improvement in students' reading aloud scores (Table 1). The post-test scores indicate a notable increase in students' ability to read aloud (Table 2).

Table 1: Results of Pre-test and Post-Test

Student	Female (F) / Male (M)	PRE-TEST Fluency & Rhythm (5)	PRE-TEST Expression (5)	PRE-TEST Pronunciation (5)	PRE-TEST TOTAL (15)	POST-TEST Fluency & Rhythm (5)	POST-TEST Expression (5)	POST-TEST Pronunciation (5)	POST-TEST TOTAL (15)
1	F	3	4	3	10	4	4	4	12
2	F	3	3	3	9	4	4	4	12
3	F	3	2	2	7	3	3	3	9
4	F	2	2	2	6	3	3	3	9
5	F	2	2	2	6	3	3	3	9
6	F	2	2	2	6	3	3	2	8
7	F	2	2	2	6	3	3	2	8
8	F	2	2	2	6	3	3	2	8
9	F	2	2	2	6	3	3	2	8
10	F	2	2	2	6	3	3	2	8
11	F	1	2	1	4	2	3	2	7
12	F	1	2	1	4	2	3	2	7
13	M	1	2	1	4	2	3	2	7
14	M	1	2	2	5	2	3	2	7
15	M	2	2	2	6	2	3	2	7
16	M	1	2	3	6	2	3	3	8
	Average	1.9	2.2	2.0	6.1	2.8	3.1	2.5	8.4

Table 2: Paired Samples T-Test (alpha = 0.05)

PRE-TEST	POST-TEST	t	df	p
Fluency & Rhythm (1.9)	Fluency & Rhythm (2.8)	10.925	16	< .001
Expression (2.2)	Expression (3.1)	15.920	16	< .001
Pronunciation (2.0)	Pronunciation (2.5)	4.123	16	< .001
Pre-Test Total (6.1)	Post-Test Total (8.4)	16.350	16	< .001

5.2 Conclusion from results

Based on the decision rule, the t value is more than 1, and the p value is less than 0.001. I reject the null hypothesis. There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test measurements. The greatest gain was

clearly in Expression. In SR coaching, I found this easy to do because students were mirroring my expression as I modeled for them. The least gain was in Pronunciation. Perhaps 3 weeks is too short a time to help students overcome their difficulties in mouthing of English words when they are used to their vernacular language Bahasa.

To answer RQ 2 on why the intervention worked, I will relate what I have done to the language learning practices that I have referenced to elicit better classroom performance from reluctant students.

5.3 Check-in and Vocal warm-up

According to Bloom et. al. (1974), language is a form of behavior that is learned through conditioning. To Bloom, language is not innate or inherent, but rather it is acquired through repeated exposure to stimuli and responses. Language learning is habit formation - so it is a conscious process (vs. instinctual / innate / in-born).

The check-in and vocal warm-up were ways to make it safe for students to be exposed to the correct stimuli and responses, through imitation and rehearsals. During the check-in and vocal warm-up, we were:

a) Greeting one another, and asking how each person was feeling – everyone, repeatedly!

b) Practicing our voices through rhythmic cheers, limericks, and rhymes.

This set a positive tone in the classroom environment for learning. It was like sound-check. It filled the class with the familiarity of English sounds. It was safe to make mistakes. The teacher is the model, and part of the fun.

5.4 Silent reading

Silent reading plays a crucial role in developing reading fluency, defined as the ability to read with accuracy, speed, and prosody. According to a study by Rasinski (2004), silent reading enables readers to allocate think more effectively, leading to increased reading speed and automaticity.

5.5 Word attack & Echo Read

Language is behavior, so it is learned by shaping and rehearsals (repeated practice). What I did was to break the task down for the students step-by-step. I used drills as one of the important techniques to learn language as proposed by Pressley (2006). By going through difficult words or phrases, it reduced students' fear of being wrong and encourages everyone to try. This reduces the frustration that students felt towards English pronunciation and vocabulary.

5.6 Song Request

Learning to read fluently in a foreign language has its challenges. Creating fluent readers requires positive reinforcement (Rasinski, 2004). Sometimes positive vibes can come in the simplest of forms, including what students have gone through in their earlier years in EFL.

Reading fluency is the key for successful high school reading (Rasinski, et. al., 2005) and motivating them by the identification and use of appropriate reinforcers (intrinsic and extrinsic rewards) can strengthen this outcome (Tilaar, 2012).

For example, a student receives an intrinsic reinforcer by correctly answering in the presence of peers, thus increasing self-esteem and confidence. In the same way, the song request is my way of introducing an intrinsic reinforcer for participating in class. The students had a voice and choice on what is a reward, and were motivated by it. For me, singing together is one way to create a safe space in class.

5.7 Choral Read

Choral reading, or reading together is one way for students to understand that they are not alone, that they are doing something together, and that they are doing it correctly with the help of the teacher. This helped to reduce the embarrassment that they felt when they made mistakes because everyone was learning together. This is a strategy recommended by Beck, McKeown, & Kucan (2013) to increase learners' robustness during vocabulary instruction.

5.8 Pair / Individual Read

Pair or individual reading allows students to show what they have achieved, and it allows the teacher to praise them for effort and achievement. In fact, it was the students who suggested reading in pairs. They were enthusiastic in reading in front of the class, and were responsible for calling on the next pair of classmates to read aloud. Crichton, J. (2014) found this to be an effective strategy in his work with teaching English pronunciation in Indonesian schools.

5.9 Reflection and Closure

I mentioned at the start that the students' confidence was in the range of between 1 and 3, the majority being in the 1 and 2 (1 being the lowest). Therefore, it was important for me to develop a positive, nurturing classroom by removing negative stimuli from the learning environment. This would involve students and teacher being honest in reviewing what we did in class, and calling on students when it was evident that they were willing to share with the class.

I used this as a way for students to share their confidence level, to share how they felt about the lesson,

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and what they found most useful. Students responded positively and shared that their confidence was high at level 5 (the highest). This is a bonus for me in this action research as I mainly wanted to focus on increasing reading fluency.

VI.   CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This is an action research project in one class of sixteen Grade 9 students carried out within three weeks. Although my intervention worked, the positive results and findings should be interpreted with caution and not be generalized. Given the small sample size, it is important to consider the assumptions of basic statistics.

Based on the findings, and within the limits that I have mentioned, it is recommended that teachers in a similar context like Teacher Lina can consider integrating SR into their reading instruction. Professional development program should include familiarizing teachers with SR strategies and their application in an EFL setting.

This research highlights the potential of useful practices, and strategies such as SR, in improving reading aloud skills among Grade 9 EFL students in Indonesia. Some teachers may say that SR is more suitable for pre-school and lower primary levels. They are not wrong. However, this research affirms that using SR at the upper grades is also a suitable intervention, a form of spiral progression. It could be addressing issues of the past when SR might not have been carried out successfully or regularly enough. Through this research, I hope teachers can be inspired to create a more structured and effective learning environment that enhances students' motivation, language acquisition and reading abilities through SR.

Appendix 1: Reading Passage 1

VISITING GRANDPARENTS

Today, Chiya is visiting her grandparents. She loves cooking with her grandmother. Her grandmother usually teaches her how to cook delicious food. At this moment, Chiya is learning how to make tasty chicken soup.

Chiya is helping to cut vegetables like onions, chilies, carrots, and potatoes. She is also writing down her grandmother's recipe. She plans to make chicken soup at home next Monday. She is making the chicken soup for her mother because next Monday is her birthday.

An hour later, Chiya and grandparents have finished eating chicken soup. Now, Chiya is listening to her grandfather tell a story. Chiya also loves listening to her grandfather's stories. Her grandfather has many stories about life, culture, and history. Some stories are funny and some stories are sad. Now, Chiya and grandmother are listening to grandfather tell a story from The Arabian Nights. It has a happy ending. They are enjoying their time together.

Appendix 2: Reading Rubric

RUBRIC TO ASSESS READING (GRADE 9)

Criterion	1 -2 mark	3 – 4 marks	5 marks
FLUENCY & RHYTHM: Reads aloud with appropriate rhythm to achieve a well-paced, fluent reading.	• Word-for-word reading • Hesitation and inappropriate pauses throughout	• Fluent reading most of the time • Proper rhythm and appropriate pauses	• Fluent reading throughout with proper rhythm and appropriate pauses
EXPRESSION: Reads aloud with appropriate variations in voice quality given the purpose, audience, and context.	• Reads in monotone with no attempt to vary tone and voice • Reader shows little understanding of purpose, audience, and context	• Reads with some attempts to vary tone and voice • Reader shows understanding of purpose, audience, and context	• Appropriate variation of tone and voice throughout • Reader shows clear understanding of purpose, audience, and context
PRONUNCIATION: Reads aloud with accurate pronunciation and clear articulation.	• Inconsistent pronunciation with more than 10 errors that are noticeable, and understanding is affected	• Consistent pronunciation with 10 or less errors that are noticeable, but understanding is not affected.	• Consistent pronunciation throughout with almost every word articulated clearly.

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