TEXT PARAMETERS AND TECHNIQUES OF READING TESTING IN CHRISTIAN AND IISLAMIC INSTITUTES

(A *Case Study* at Institut Alkitab Tiranus Bandung and IAIN "SMH" Banten)

(**TES)**

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Abstract

Testing reading ability seems deceptively straightforward when it is compared to, for example, testing oral ability. It is widely believed that it can be done by just taking a passage from which we derive some questions whether in multiple-choice form, true-false, completion, short answer or essays. However, this approach to text selection may result in the tests which are not authentic and do not measure what we want to measure. One possible solution to this problem is using text parameters including text topic, range of vocabulary, text types, text form, text length, range of grammar, text readability, and intended readership. The present study tries to compare text parameters and techniques of reading testing in two different higher education institutions in Indonesia: a Biblical Institute and a State Institute for Islamic Studies. The texts analyzed were selected from the Mid and Final Semester tests from 2005-2008. There eight reading test batteries from each institution Text parameter analysis reveals that in biblical institute, the topics of the texts are homogeneous, mostly about Jesus Christ with biblical story vocabulary. The texts are mainly in non fiction type (reports) and in the form or narrative, with word length from 200 to 240 words. The texts employ longer clauses and subordination, but they are still easy to understand by college students. The intended readership is quite specific; Christian readers with biblical background knowledge. In the State Institute for Islamic studies, the topics of the texts are more varied including *The Koran and the Prophet, Education and Leadership, The Pillars of Islam, Islam and Education Reform, Islam and History, The Responsibility of Ummah, Islamization,* and *Education in Medieval Islam*. With this more varied topics, the vocabulary learned is also more complex and homogeneous. Different from text types in the biblical institutes, the texts employed in State Institute for Islamic Studies are articles in argumentative form. The grammar uses longer clauses and complex sentences with medium level of text difficulty. The intended readership is wider than that of texts in the Biblical Institute; Muslim readers with Islamic background knowledge. The present study also shows that the reading test techniques used in the two institutions are all discrete point tests including true-false, multiple choice, short answer, matching words/phrases, and information transfer. These findings suggest that based on the parameters, the texts and test techniques selected are rather monotonous. Teachers are suggested to include reading materials related to the same themes of topics but they are confronted with current issues so that the test anxiety will be reduced and reading tests will be more interesting.

Keywords: *text parameters, technique of reading testing, text topic, range of vocabulary, text types, text form, text length, range of grammar, text readability, and intended readership*

INTRODUCTION

The testing of reading ability seems deceptively straightforward when it is compare to, say, the testing of oral ability. It can be done by just taking a passage and asking some questions. But this may not be a very good test, and it may not measure what the teacher wants to measure.

A good reading testing considers many aspects, and some of them are the appropriateness of the test text selection and the techniques choice. There are valid arguments both for and against the use of the content-related text as a vehicle for testing reading comprehension. It can be claimed that background knowledge in the content area of a reading passage can enable students to perform at their highest ability level on reading comprehension tests. On the other hand, tests which are too specialized may assess subject

matter knowledge more than they test reading proficiency. Subject-related texts might also discriminate against individuals or groups who happen to possess less background knowledge in a particular field.

Some researchers have touched on this problem. Peretz and Shoham (2007) in Hughes (2003) have investigated 177 advanced students of the faculties of Humanities and Social Science and Faculty of Science and Technology at Ben Gurion University, Israel. They found that topic familiarity of a text correlate positively with performance on reading comprehension tests. The students' rate was higher when the students were tested with the reading test texts related to their field of study than texts related to other topics. While Nelson (1985) found that there was no significant correlation between the students' interest and the reading comprehension results. And Baldwin et al. (1985) in Hughes (2003) have investigated the effects of topic interest and prior knowledge on reading comprehension using seventh- and eighth-grade students. They found that although there was no correlation between topic interest and prior knowledge, it seems that prior knowledge and topic interest have an additive effect on reading comprehension.

Despite the controversy whether there is or not significant correlation between the topic familiarity of a reading test text and the reading comprehension results, Hughes (2003) stressed that the texts candidate for a reading test are expected to be able to deal with can be specified along a number of parameters: intended readership, text topic, text types, text form, text forms, text length, text readability, range of vocabulary, and range of grammar. The reason for specifying text in such detail, according to Hughes, is that we want the texts include in a test to be representative of the text candidates should be able to read successfully.

While in choosing possible techniques for reading test, it is important that the techniques used should interfere as little as possible with the reading itself, and they should not add a significantly difficult task on top of reading. This is one reason for being wary of requiring candidates to write answers, particularly in the language of the text. They may read perfectly but difficulties in writing may prevent them demonstrating this. As a possible solution to this problem, Hughes (2003) again offered some possible techniques that can be used in reading test, include; multiple choice, short answer, gap filling, and information transfer.

As a religious higher education institution, both Intitut Alkitab Tiranus (Tiranus Biblical Institute) which is usually called "IAT Bandung" and Institut Agama Islam Negeri "Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin" (State Institute for Islamic Studies "Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin") which is usually called IAIN "SMH" Banten teach English as a general basic courses (MKDU) which covers the four language skills – those are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This study focused on reading which tried to find out whether the texts used in the reading tests in those two institutions related or not to their field of study, how the reading test text parameters were applied in those two institutions, and to observe what kind of techniques were applied in the reading testing.

METHOD

The study was descriptive and qualitative in nature since this study did not use statistical calculation to measure the validity or reliability. Qualitative study in nature is conducted inductively, meaning that the study begins from data collected from the field and analyzed (Cresswell, 1984). Descriptive method, because this method characterized by attempting to describe characteristics and events that exist (Kamil, 1985).

The study was conducted at Intitut Alkitab Tiranus (Tiranus Biblical Institute) which is usually called "IAT Bandung", and at Institut Agama Islam Negeri "Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin" (State Institute for Islamic Studies "Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin") which is usually called IAIN "SMH" Banten. The researcher chose these universities because both of the institutes are well known in Indonesia; IAIN "SMH" Banten is one of the best Islamic higher education as well as IAT Bandung is one of the best Biblical institute in the country, and the both were easy to access by the researchers.

In a qualitative research the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data collection play a very important role (Musthafa, 2000). Therefore, in collecting the data the researchers applied document analysis and interview. Merriam (1998) chose the term "document" to refer to a wide range of written, visual, and physical materials. Documents also include what LeCompte and Preissle (1993) defined as artifacts – "symbolic materials such as writing and signs and nonsymbolic materials such as tools and furnishing." Merriam (1998) stressed that finding relevant materials is the first step in document analysis strategy. A qualitative study of classroom interaction would lead to documents in the form of instructors' lesson plan, student assignments, objects in the classroom, official grade reports, teacher evaluation, and so on.

This research concentrated on analyzing the written documents, those are the formative tests from the both institutes– the mid term test (UTS) and the final term test (UAS), during the last four years (from 2005 – 2008). Realizing the fact that these documents were not produced for the researchers need, they tried to find the relatable document to the need of the research. Selltiz at all (1959) observed that finding pertinent documents hinges to some extent on the investigator's ability to think creatively about the problem under the study. The use of such data demands a capacity to ask many questions related to the research problem. Based on the purposes of the research, the researchers did not analyzed all the documents contain those formative test. As a general basic courses (MKDU), the test of English in both IAT Bandung and IAIN "SMH" Banten covers the four language skills – those are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. But since the study aimed to find out to find out whether or not the both institutes used reading test text related to their field of study, how the reading test text parameters were applied in those two institutions, and to observe what kind of techniques were applied in the reading testing, the researchers then selected only certain documents related to reading skill evaluation from those tests to be analyzed.

In using a document resource, Merriam (1998) reminded that a researcher has to rely on someone else's description and interpretation of data rather than use the raw data as a basis for analysis. In this case, the lecturers who created the test from the both institutes were the most applicable persons to help the researchers. The document analysis was the supported by interviewing those lecturers.

Finally, in analyzing the data, the researchers categorized and classified the data such as to what category of types or forms the reading test text used by IAT Bandung and IAIN "SMH" Banten belong to, and what category of test techniques IAT Bandung and IAIN "SMH" Banten use. During the categorization, the researcher tried to eye on possible ideas, perceptions and experiences. And the final phase of the data analysis is to interpret and conclude the findings.

FINDINGS

From analyzing eight documents of formative test applied in IAT Bandung during the period of 2005 to 2008 (four documents of mid term test and four documents final term test), it was found that the text topics of the reading test in IAT Bandung were all about what Jesus done. All the texts were taken from the Bible; even some texts were used more than once. The topic about "Jesus heals a man born blind," taken from the book of John chapter 9 verses 1-12, were applied twice; in Final Test 2005 and in the Final Test 2007. While the topic about "Jesus changes water to wine," taken from the book of John chapter 2 verses 1-11, were applied three times; in Mid Test 2006, Mid Test 2007, and Mid Test 2008. Moreover, the range of the vocabularies used in the text was around the biblical stories. Furthermore, the types of the texts were all non fiction; particularly reports, in form of narration. The text length generally belongs to short texts with the length from 206 to not more than 296 words. Finally, the ranges of grammar of the texts belong to be easy to understand since there were only limited longer clauses and subordination in texts.

While in IAIN "SMH" Banten during the same period of 2005 to 2008, it was found that the text topics of the reading test in IAIN "SMH" Banten were all related to Islam. The texts were taken from various sources and various authors. Two texts were taken taken from John L. Esposito, *Islam the Straight Path*, p.77; one fromG.W. Choudhury*, Islam and the Contemporary World*, pp. 12-13; one from F. M. Denny. *Islam*, pp.10-11, one from from S.A.A. Mawdudi, *Witnesses unto Mankind*, p. 86, one from from Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp.32-33, and two other text did not mention the source. Moreover, the range of the vocabularies used in the text was around the development of Islam, started from around Koran and the Prophet Muhammad till to around the history of Islamic education. Furthermore, the types of the texts were all non fiction; particularly article, in form of argumentation. The text length generally belongs to medium texts with the length from 408 to 786 words. Finally, the ranges of grammar of the texts belong to be rather difficult to understand since there were some longer clauses and subordination in texts. (The summary of the reading test text parameters in IAT Bandung and in IAIN "SMH" Banten can be seen in the table 1 and 2 in the appendices).

Meanwhile, the analysis of the reading test techniques applied in IAT Bandung showed that during the period of 2005-2008, there were five kinds of reading test techniques applied in IAT Bandung. Those were True-false, Multiple choice, Short answer, Matching words/phrases, and Information transfer. And there were four kinds in IAIN "SMH" Banten, they were True-false, Multiple choice, Short answer, and Matching

words/phrases. (The summary of the reading test techniques applied in both institutions can be seen in the table 3 in the appendices).

DISCUSSION

From the analysis above using the reading texts parameters proposed by Hughes (2003) which are the topics, the source, the content, the ranges vocabularies and grammar, the text types, the text form, and the text length, it can be summarized that the intended readership of the reading test text in IAT Bandung was general Christian readers with biblical background knowledge. There was almost no clear parameter which showed those texts were intended for the academician or college students. When this was confirmed to the English lecture in the interview, she said one of the considerations for this choice was the very limited ability of the student who would get big difficulties if the academically texts were applied. This was also the reason why the lecturer preferred to directly use the Bible texts to become the text of her reading test. Further more, she mainly concerned her students' purpose in learning English in choosing the text. "They learn English for their future service need as a servant of God and I think I have to use as many materials related to that endeavor," she said in the interview. In this notion, she has the same thought with Brown (2001) who proposed the necessity to ask some questions when selecting a text for teaching or testing reading, such as; "how many students will encounter the text in real life" or "how far the text was relevant to the students' goals in learning to read English."

More over, the lecture explained that some of the stories in the text such as the story of "Jesus changes water to wine," and "Jesus heals a man born blind" had already been familiar to the students. That was the justification why the lecture used this text more than once. She believed that this kind of texts attracted the students' attention and it would directly influence the test result. This idea was in line with Peretz and Shoham (2007) in Hughes (2003) who understood that topic familiarity of a text correlate positively with performance on reading comprehension tests and Baldwin et al. (1985) in Hughes (2003) who said that prior knowledge and topic interest have an additive effect on reading comprehension. Further more, with Christine Nuttall (1996) who believed that the students should find the text interesting, enjoyable, challenging, and appropriate for the students' goals in learning English. Based on the purpose of the book of John – from which the texts were taken, all the text were in form of narration. Those texts belong to *report* which is in Brown's list (2001) go to *non fiction* genre of written language. And as the book was written for lay people, consequently, the ranges of grammar of the all texts belong to be easy to understand since there were only limited longer clauses and subordination in the texts.

Finally for the texts length which generally belongs to short texts with the length from 206 to not more than 296 words, the lecture argued that she did not mainly intend to test the expeditious but the careful reading instead, that was why she thought she did not need to apply longer texts. Yet, despite the inexistence of the parameters that shows the text were intended to academician or college students, still the other parameters which have been discussed above clearly showed that IAT Bandung used the reading test text related its students' field of study.

Meanwhile, using the same texts parameters, it can be summarized that the intended readership of the reading test text in IAIN "SMH" Banten was Muslim readers with Islamic background knowledge. The types of the texts which were all non fiction; particularly article, in form of argumentation, and the text length which generally which belongs to medium texts with the length from 408 to 786 words were the two parameters that show those texts were intended the academician or college students. When this was confirmed to the English lecture in the interview, she said the argumentative text challenges the student's logic more rather than other kinds of text. Further she explained that the various sources and the medium length of the text could widen the test range to catch the student reading capability from the lowest to the highest ones. Even though the test texts were taken from various sources, they were all about Islamic religion points which were discussed in the most common real contexts of life such us education, management, leadership, and the responsibilities. This would cover the students' English reading ability in contextualizing the Islamic values. In this notion, she also had the same thought with Brown (2001) who proposed the necessity to ask some questions when selecting a text for teaching or testing reading, such as; "how many students will encounter the text in real life" or "how far the text is relevant to the students' goals in learning to read English." Not different from the IAT Bandung lecture, the IAN "SMH" Banten lecture explained that most of the Islamic values discussed in the text had already been familiar to the students. She believed that

this kind of texts attracted the students' attention, so that they would not be frustrated when these familiar values then related to some life context of which components (such as the vocabulary) may be difficult to some of them.

All the texts were in form of argumentation. Those texts belonged to *article* which is in Brown's list (2001) also go to *non fiction* genre of written language. And the lecture explained that as those test texts the were intended for the academician – particularly college students, consequently, the ranges of grammar of the texts were a bit complicated since there were some longer clauses and subordination in texts. Finally for the texts length which generally belongs to medium texts with the length from 408 to not more than 786 words, the lecture argued that such kind of difficulty level suit the college students who learn English as an MKDU (general basic courses). The level of the all the parameters in the English reading test texts of IAIN "SMH" Banten showed that the texts were intended to academician, particularly college students. This level of parameters also clearly showed that IAIN "SMH" Banten used the reading test text related its students' field of study.

And from the five kinds of reading test techniques applied in IAT Bandung during the period of 2005-2008 (True-false, Multiple choice, Short answer, Matching words/phrases, and Information transfer), *Short answer* was the most often used. It was applied those all tests during the period except in the Final test 2006 (in Final-2005, Mid-20006, Mid-20007, Final-2007, Mid-20008, and Final-2008). The lecturer reason for using this technique the most was for catching the students with best ability. She said that her experience showed that not many students were able to successfully give the appropriate respond to this kind of method. More over, she added that this kind of test gives only limited chance for cheating during the test. This conception agrees Hughes' opinion (2003) that cheating is likely to be more difficult in answering this kind of test. The second most common technique used in IAT Bandung's reading test was True-False. It was applied six times from the total of eight times test during the period (in Final-2005, Mid-20006, Mid-20007, Final-2007, Mid-20008, and Final-2008). The lecturer consideration for using this technique was for catching the students from the weakest ability. Hughes (2003) suggested not using this method since in his deliberation, the method gave the test taker big chance to guess the correct response by chance alone, but the lecture argued that she never used a single True-false technique without companion of other techniques. And the next was matching words or phrases. It was used five times (in Final-2005, Mid-20006, Mid-20007, Final-2007, and Mid-20008). Harmer (2001) considered that this method was realistic to be used in testing the reading ability.

While in IAIN "SMH" Banten, the applied kinds of reading test techniques were almost the same in the each of the test; those are the True-false, Multiple choice, and Short answer. The fourth kind, Matching words/phrases, only appeared once in the Final test 2008. Not very different from the reason of IAT Bandung lecture, the IAIN "SMH" Banten lecture applied the combination of the True-false and Short answer methods was for catching the students from the lowest until to the highest ability. While the reason for using the Multiple choice method was the need of a fast scoring considering the big number of the students. This reason was in line with Hughes (2003) that one of the advantages of using multiple choice method is that the scoring should be rapid and economical.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the study comes to the following conclusions: *firstly*, there were some similarities and some differences in the way of applying the text parameters text in IAT Bandung and IAIN "SMH" Banten. The similarities were in topic choice and the intended readership, in which both institutes used topic related to their field of study while the intended readership of the reading test texts in both institution were their students with their religion background. The differences in the parameters covered the types of the text which was more scientific in IAIN "SMH" Banten, the text length which was shorter in IAT Bandung, and the ranges of grammar which was also easier in IAT Bandung. *Secondly*, there were only a bit differences in the reading test techniques applied in both institution. There were five kinds of reading test techniques applied in IAT Bandung; those were True-false, Multiple choice, Short answer, Matching words/phrases, and Information transfer. While it was only four IAIN "SMH" Banten; those were True-false, Multiple choice, Short answer, and Matching words/phrases.

It is then recommended for the English lecturer in IAT Bandung to try to choose a more scientific text, widen the range of the text vocabulary, and vary the reading test. While for the English lecturer in IAIN

"SMH" Banten, it was recommended to consider the length of text whether it was too long and to vary the reading test.

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