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Is Our Students’ Word Knowledge Good Enough to Read The Jakarta Post Successfully?

Oleh
Furqonul Aziez

Abstract
Kajian ini ditujukan untuk mengungkap pertanyaan sederhana, yakni apakah para mahasiswa bahasa Inggris kita memiliki kosakata yang cukup untuk membaca teks-teks berbahasa Inggris yang ditujukan untuk khalayak umum, seperti The Jakarta Post (TJP). Pertanyaan seperti ini muncul mengingat secara teoretis, membaca yang berhasil baru dimungkinkan bila pembaca telah menguasai setidaknya 95% kata yang ada di dalam teks. Pada tingkat ini pembaca tidak perlu lagi banyak membuka kamus karena sebagian dari 5% kata yang tidak diketahui tersebut dapat ditebak melalui konteks. Kajian dilakukan di dua perguruan tinggi, di Unpas Bandung dan UMP Purwokerto. Data diperoleh dengan memberikan tes menerjemahkan kata-kata isi yang diambil dari sebuah berita di TJP. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dari dua kelompok mahasiswa tersebut, tidak ada satu responden pun yang menguasai 95% kata yang ada di dalam teks. Penguasaan tertinggi (90,70%) diperoleh mahasiswa Unpas Bandung, sedangkan yang terendah (50,77%) diperoleh mahasiswa dari perguruan tinggi yang sama.

Kata Kunci: Kosakata, membaca pemahaman, kata isi.

A. Introduction
As one of the loyal readers of The Jakarta Post (TJP), I am quite curious to know whether this daily newspaper can not only be comprehended well by the expatriates, but also by the wider readership in this country. My curiosity recurs especially when speaking and working with my English-teacher wife. As she once told me she was trusted to teach grade three students at her workplace, a senior high school in Bandung, and, according to her, duty came
mainly due to her ‘satisfactory’ work performance. To tell the truth, I marveled at the confession. The reason is quite simple: she keeps inquiring the Indonesian equivalents of the difficult words in the reading passages (some of them taken from TJP) of the school tests. Besides, repeated questions she often poses on the translation of sentences in the English course-books double my doubt.

To satisfy my curiosity, I decided to conduct a small research on this issue some time ago. The aim of this investigation was to answer the question: “Is TJP actually intelligible for even our English students?” (Of course, my wife was an English teacher training student herself).

The research set out from the assumption that, in order to read independently, learners need to know at least 95 per cent of the running words in a text. This means that on average only one word in 20 will be unfamiliar to them. Or, in other words, if they know less than 95 per cent of the total words in a text they will be in a comprehension problem, as they have no enough words to deduce meaning from the unfamiliar words with.

This percentage of vocabulary knowledge in a running text seems out of question, since most vocabulary research uses it as a criterion when referring to reading. However, the question of how many words make up the 95% is still a controversy. Some claim that for various languages the 5,000 most frequent words (or 3,000 word ‘families’) yield a coverage of 90% to 95% of the word tokens in average texts. In other words, with the knowledge of 5,000 most frequent words at their disposal readers can comprehend general texts successfully. This has been claimed, for instance, for Russian, French, English, and Dutch (Hazenberg 1996: 147). Some others believe that the vocabulary size of 14,000 covers 95% of the tokens (all the words which appear in a text) in a running text. The gap between 5,000 and 14,000 is of course not a trivial one. This discrepancy may be caused by the difference in the conception of word or by the method of measuring vocabulary size.

Since vocabulary size is not the main concern of this study, the question of which size actually makes up the 95% of text coverage is not discussed here. This study focuses on the number of words known in a running text. One of the steps in the test construction procedure
follows the same mechanism as in determining lexical density (the proportion of types against the tokens). All words occurring more than once are singled out, leaving only one in the corpus (a group of words contained in a text). In other words, only word types (particular words constituting a text) are included. However, when counting the percentage, the correct reply is extrapolated with the tokens (all words occurring in a text).

B. Method
For the purpose, I administered a translation test to a class of 27 students of semester six at English Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Purwokerto and a class of 33 of the same semester at English Literature Study Program at Pasundan University of Bandung. The task was to find the Indonesian translation or equivalents for the test words. Their replies must be based on the accompanying text, from which the test words were taken out. The criteria for the test word choice were (1) they were not proper names, (2) they were not function words, (3) they were content words, and (4) they were not familiar words, like they and three.

The text was taken from a piece of news in the front page of TJP of February 2, 2006 edition and it contained 101 words. Though the actual number of the running words was 101, 6 were names and 31 were repeated words (e.g. the word to appears 5 times and is counted only 1). Of the remaining 65 words, 22 were considered very familiar, like they and three. And, though still included in the calculation of the test results, for the sake of efficiency only 43 words were then selected as the test words.

Following the test word selection, a test battery was constructed. The test format was simple. The words were put in a row in accordance with their appearance in the text. The word which appears first in the text will appear as the first item, the one which appears the second will appear as the second item, and so forth. The candidates were then required to supply the Indonesian equivalents or definition in the blank space on the right of each test word. The test format is as follows.
HAMAS ASSERTS RIGHT TO SELF-DEFENCE

Hamas, under mounting international pressure to renounce violence, asserted the Palestinians’ right to self-defense Sunday after the first Israeli air raids since its shocking election victory last month.

Three members of another militant group, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, were killed in a series of overnight air strikes focused on northern Gaza which Israel said were in response to a rocket attack on a kibbutz.

Al-Aqsa, an offshoot of the former ruling Fatah faction, also vowed to hit back at Israel in the aftermath of the strikes. They said suicide bombers were ready to exact their revenge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Test Words</th>
<th>Indonesian Equivalent / Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>asserts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>right</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>self-defense</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>mounting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>pressure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considering that not all words in the text were tested, the writer counted only the test words the candidates failed to answer or answered incorrectly. The number of the unanswered test items or of the incorrectly answered items is the same as the number of the words in the text which the students are not acquainted with. In percentage, the number of the unknown words (the unanswered or wrong replies) is divided by 65 then multiplied by 100. For example, if a respondent failed to answer 11 test items, we can assume that he/she does not know 16.92% of the words in the text or, from the reverse perspective, the respondent in question knows 83.03% of the 65 words of the text.

C. Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis took me by surprise. None of the students met the minimum requirement of the successful reading. From the two classes of respondents, only two candidates are predicted to encounter minor difficulty in reading TJP. Both students know 90.70% and 87.69% of the text words respectively. The rest will
find TJP a too demanding material. The students from Bandung show more variation compared to those from Purwokerto. The brightest respondent from Bandung knows 90.70% of the words while the weakest knows only 50.77%. This is quite different from those from Purwokerto. The top student knows only 83.03% but the bottom knows 61.54% of the text words.

The mean word knowledge of both groups of respondents also shows difference. Average students from Bandung have less vocabulary knowledge than those from Purwokerto. Although the mean percentage difference between 68.72 and 70.14 may be diminutive, the range of both groups of scores is considerable. Bandung students have the range of 39.93 while those of Purwokerto have only 21.54. As we might be aware, the difference in word knowledge between the low and high performing students will have serious influence on the curricular content and the teaching approach needed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resp No</th>
<th>Correct Replies</th>
<th>Wrong Replies</th>
<th>% of Cor Rep</th>
<th>% of Wr Rep</th>
<th>% S TOKEN</th>
<th>% P TOKEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>86.04</td>
<td>13.96</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>90.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>81.40</td>
<td>18.60</td>
<td>12.31</td>
<td>87.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>74.42</td>
<td>25.58</td>
<td>16.92</td>
<td>83.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>74.42</td>
<td>25.58</td>
<td>16.92</td>
<td>83.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>72.09</td>
<td>27.91</td>
<td>18.46</td>
<td>81.54</td>
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<td>.....</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37.20</td>
<td>62.80</td>
<td>41.54</td>
<td>58.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>34.88</td>
<td>65.12</td>
<td>43.07</td>
<td>56.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32.56</td>
<td>67.44</td>
<td>44.62</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30.23</td>
<td>69.77</td>
<td>46.15</td>
<td>53.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25.58</td>
<td>74.42</td>
<td>49.23</td>
<td>50.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUM</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>1739.46</td>
<td>1565.20</td>
<td>1032.28</td>
<td>2267.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEAN</td>
<td>22.67</td>
<td>20.33</td>
<td>52.34</td>
<td>47.66</td>
<td>31.28</td>
<td>68.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2
Test Results of Students of Muhammadiyah University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resp No</th>
<th>Correct Repites</th>
<th>Wrong Repites</th>
<th>% of Cor Rep</th>
<th>% of Wr Rep</th>
<th>% WR TOKEN</th>
<th>% P TOKEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>74.42</td>
<td>25.58</td>
<td>16.92</td>
<td>83.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>72.09</td>
<td>27.91</td>
<td>18.46</td>
<td>81.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>69.77</td>
<td>30.23</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>80.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>67.44</td>
<td>32.56</td>
<td>21.54</td>
<td>78.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>65.12</td>
<td>34.88</td>
<td>23.08</td>
<td>76.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>......</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46.51</td>
<td>53.49</td>
<td>35.38</td>
<td>64.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46.51</td>
<td>53.49</td>
<td>35.38</td>
<td>64.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41.86</td>
<td>58.14</td>
<td>38.46</td>
<td>61.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41.86</td>
<td>58.14</td>
<td>38.46</td>
<td>61.54</td>
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<td>41.86</td>
<td>58.14</td>
<td>38.46</td>
<td>61.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>MEAN</td>
<td>23.59</td>
<td>19.41</td>
<td>54.87</td>
<td>45.31</td>
<td>29.86</td>
<td>70.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remarks: % P > TOKEN = The proportion of word knowledge against the token.

As the two tables above show us, average students from both universities do not have the knowledge of 31.28% of the whole words contained in the text. Or, we can say 31.28% of the words in TJP are unfamiliar to the English student readership. This number is of course far below the minimum requirement of 5%, a proportion which still allows readers to make educated guessing of word meaning from the context.

D. Conclusion and Recommendations

From this small research, we can conclude that most students know less vocabulary than they should in order to be able to read successfully. Consequently, TJP is beyond the reading capability of even average university students majoring in English. If so is the case, TJP cannot be intended for the ordinary Indonesian readership. It must be for a very limited number of people with native-like mastery of English.
This conclusion is nonetheless still debatable in as much as the research contains substantial weaknesses, especially in the sampling procedure, both the text and respondent sampling. Ideally, the student samples are extended to those of state universities, which subsequently cover those majoring in English language/literature and in English teacher's training. The same case applies to the text tested. It should have included as wide topics as there are in TJP. With such a specification the research results will have better validity and the conclusions drawn are much more robust.

Apart from the questionable validity, two recommendations can be put forward. For English teachers, they must ensure that vocabulary become an integral part of instructional objectives. Research shows that systematic teaching of vocabulary is effective in increasing students' word knowledge, both the qualitative and quantitative. For the TJP, when writing the news and articles intended particularly for the Indonesian readership, the use of high frequency vocabulary is indispensable. A research I conducted on SMA students revealed that difficult vocabulary hampers textbook comprehension more seriously than complex grammar does.

References


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