INTRODUCTION

Reading Comprehension has been determined (by the Director of First Common Year Program) to be one of the core subjects for the first year IPB students, either in semester one or two. With the objective of being able to read English texts effectively and efficiently, the teaching of reading for these undergraduate programs are basically confined to skills that can develop reading speed and improve students’ comprehension and reasoning abilities. Thus, skills like finding both general and specific ideas, guessing unknown words, finding meanings from English-English dictionary, predicting, and finding inferences are those need to be covered. Such kind of teaching, however, can sometimes become a demanding task when dealing with certain classroom conditions and with certain targets.

It is, therefore, a challenge for all English teachers in my university to be able to carry out the task well so as to achieve the above teaching objectives. Meanwhile, students’ evaluation reveals that 3 semesters ago, teachers obtained various scores in their teaching evaluation, ranging from 2 to 3.7 out of the 1-4 scale. This paper, accordingly, is written to find out the teaching method and strategies used by those obtaining relatively good scores (3.2 and above) in order to disseminate them as better insights for the teaching of reading not only in my university but also other schools or colleges.

UNDERLYING THEORIES

Numerous efforts and strategies in teaching reading have widely been investigated by researchers, scholars and teachers who are struggling to provide better teaching-learning methods in English classrooms. The salient aspect mostly argued is finding the best way to make all students engage in accomplishing the tasks and other learning activities. These result in the emergence of quite recent teaching method such as “Communicative” “Cooperative”, and “Collaborative” teaching, despite its controversy (Corporation, 2004). Goodmatcher and Kajiura (Goodmatcher; and Kajiura, 2011), for instance, wrote the report on how some teachers in Japan made a shift in their teaching method, turning students’ activities from “solo” (which had been used for relatively long time) to pairs or small groups to bring learning more closer to the real world; namely, providing opportunities for interaction and activating deeper thinking. Similarly, Gao (Gao, 2008) points out that to achieve what has been stated in the teaching new syllabus in his country, China, - involving reading speed and reasoning abilities – communicative activities were perceived to be the most effective way. Furthermore, classroom reading activities from Pre-, While-, and Post-Reading stages, or those to be performed in pairs or small groups have also been put forth to (TE Editor, 2006).
In addition to the teaching methods, attention has also been given to the reading materials that can generate communicative learning. Sets of “real life” passages as sources of reading materials have been utilized and explored in a variety of ways. There is even involvement of technology and multimedia to support any classroom practices to ensure that students will gain not only the knowledge but also the experience from their practices due to the exposure provided. (Warschauer, M., & Meskill, C., 2000)

THE TEACHING OF READING IN IPB

Having reading as the core subject for undergraduate program in IPB, especially those in the First Year Common Program (FYCP), has last for more than 35 years. Although materials are changed periodically, the skills covered are mainly the same.

The teaching of reading is given in two types of classes; namely; “Lecture class” and “Tutorial class”. Since dealing with theories and holding between 100 – 120 students, the former, Lecture classes, nowadays, are equipped with LCD to help teachers illustrate and explain all the theories along with a few examples of exercises. Naturally, teachers carry out most of the talk, thus, not many discussions occur in this type of class. Although opportunities for asking questions are always provided, nearly no students will take such a chance and pose themselves as “receivers” with little participation, instead. The latter type of class, conversely, the Tutorial classes, normally hold approximately 50 students and are intended for discussing various exercises in line with the theories given in the previous week. Lasting for about 100 minutes, activities in this class is centralized in completing all sets of exercises written in the reading material book provided. It is in this kind of class that intense interaction between students and their teacher take place. With the years gone by and with the absence of current information on teaching learning information, however, the teaching of reading may sometimes turn into a monotonous activity. Each teacher carries out this duty on their own way and with their own teaching style.

At the end of each semester, nonetheless, an evaluation on teachers’ performance is announced by the Directorate of FYCP who ask students to score their teachers’ performance in a 1-4 scale. Though it is not 100 percent reliable as the questionnaire do not merely cover the teaching method, such an evaluation can be used as a feedback on what a teacher has performed in the classroom. It was, indeed a major concern when, once, the result of the evaluation score ranged between 2 - 3.4, which means that there was a significant gap in teachers’ performance. In fact, this score has changed over the last two semester, and all scores are 3 and above now. Still, it is believed that knowing what others do in their classroom will be able to improve reading the teaching of reading and bring it closer to its objectives.

METHODS

Questionnaires on how teachers carry out their duty in the reading classes were distributed to all teachers to fill out, and at the same time, report on the teachers’ evaluation score was obtained from the Directorate of FYCP. Interviews were then performed to those
achieving high scores (above 3.3) so as to obtain deeper insight on what they wrote in the questionnaire. It is worth noting that teachers looking after the reading classes vary at their age starting from early thirties to late fifties. Only a few result, however, will be discussed in here.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It was found that all of these teachers have similar perception when they are teaching reading classes in this undergraduate program; viz. assisting students to master all the reading skills required. The salient factor appeared from my questionnaire is that only three teachers (out of 15) mentioned that when conducting teaching, what they bear in mind is to make their students enjoy doing the learning process. When others were asked for clarification regarding this matter and whether or not they have intention to make their classroom alive, nevertheless, most of these teachers definitely said “yes”.

Several teachers even stated their awareness that at a certain time, along the time range given for teaching reading (100 minutes), concentration will reach its peak to go down afterwards. It is the presence of such “critical” time that makes them decide either to “reduce” their teaching speed or turn to other “tension-relieving” activities.

The above case then leads to the next question in the questionnaire; namely, how they carry out the teaching process. It was revealed that teachers’ ways of teaching vary from one person to another, but the most crucial finding in this case is that no teachers are well informed with current teaching methods widely discussed in the education field or even used by other teachers elsewhere. None of them have heard about “cooperative” or “collaborative” learning. What they carry out in the classroom, accordingly, depends on their knowledge and intuition as teachers.

The results of both questionnaire and interview indicate that, interestingly, the majority (85%) of teachers have applied active, communicative, and collaborative learning, over the last about four years (excluding the one with score 2). Placing students in pairs or small groups, asking students to do a small “project”, creating environment where students can share opinions, have been conducted by majority of these teachers. With the informal meeting in the beginning of each semester and the sharing of what teachers with good scores did in their classroom, there is a progress that the teachers gained last semester: all teachers have 3 and above for their score. However, I am more interested to investigate teachers’ teaching activities rather than just the scores obtained as these are expected to make students more active in carrying out their learning in order to make it more comprehensible.

To give a clear description on this matter, the next discussion will focus on what some teachers have done to ensure active participation and understanding of the students in their reading classes:
1. Teacher A (a woman in her 50s)

She likes to put her students into groups, containing around five to six randomly as a fixed group – meaning that the members of the group are always the same throughout the semester. At the end of her class, she always reminds her students to individually do all of the exercises for the following week’s class at home so that they are ready for discussion.

On the day of discussion she uses a lottery to determine which group has to do which exercise (in general each unit in the book comprises 5 – 7 passages to discuss). This means that one particular group has to prepare and only focus on certain exercises (according to the lottery). So, first, students in each group are given the opportunity to discuss the answers they have had with the other members of that group and compromise the answers if differences appear. Together, they also have to find supporting information to their answers, anticipate questions, and the like. After that, each group has to lead the discussion based on the exercise they have done, and are responsible for any questions from other students or clarify any explanation when required. This kind of teaching is carried out every week with the same group members but different kinds of exercise as stated in the lottery. The role of the teacher in this case is to provide assistance and consultation when students are not sure of the answer or not clear about any particular idea.

2. Teacher B (a man of his mid – thirties)

This teacher is apparently active and energetic in all kinds of situations, including when teaching. He is always noticed to be close and open with his students. Having the opinion that students need to be “energized” from time to time, he likes to do a variety of activities of what he calls “ice breaking activities”. In the middle of his teaching, for instance, he often “refresh” the classroom atmosphere by asking the whole class to sing simple songs (e.g. translated Indonesian song “Disini senang”) while moving their body at the same time. The intention is that all students can shift their attention from a serious or tense thing to something different and fun for a while. 5-7 minute activities is considered to be sufficient before going back discussing the book.

Besides placing students into small group to discuss the material (as conducted by Teacher A), he sometimes apply “jigsaw method” in his teaching. It was noticed that students become more active and independent in completing their tasks when this method is applied.

At other times, he makes “group competition” where he constructs additional questions but related to the topic under discussion or/and the ones dealing with other units that have been discussed so far. This activity is usually conducted when he wants to give a review on all materials covered. Students will actively answer the questions in order to “win” such a competition and get a bar of chocolate as a reward.

3. Teacher C, a woman in her late forties

This teacher often obtains high score (above 3.3) in this reading class. She always tries to make students take active roles in their learning process including the time when she
is giving explanation in the Lecture class. Asking questions to students, pointing one, two or some students to give examples, and the like are the activities included. When exercises are approached in the Lecture class, she often asks one of her students to come forward and lead the discussion. The positive point about this is that students feel more relax after reviewing the theory.

Her Tutorial class is not always split into small groups as she uses different kinds of ways when teaching. Students are directed to work individually, in pairs, small groups at different times, but it is mostly students who lead the discussion. Games are sometimes used in the classroom. Take the Bingo game as an example. When learning about parts of speech, she takes 20 words with different part of speech from the passages in the textbook and write them on the “main” card, then provide ten cards, each of which contains only ten of those words, with a variety of combinations. No cards have the same words. Each card is given to 10 small groups of students. Two students are asked to lead this game by mentioning the part of speech of the 20 words in the main card in turn. For instance, if they see the word “care” they have to say “the noun / verb form of “care”. Or when they see the word “stressful” they are expected to say “the adjective form of “stress”, etc. Other students in groups have to watch their card carefully and think quickly as in their card they might have both “care” and “careless”, for instance. As a result, they have to think and decide quickly the verb form of care. When all of the 10 words are called out, this group will say “Bingo!”, and then all students will check together whether or not the words in the group card are mentioned.

4. Teacher D, a woman in her early thirties

Teacher D is not only an active but also creative teacher who likes to spend a lot of time doing preparation before teaching to make various games. Knowing that some students use books used by students in the previous semester, thus equipped with answers, she likes to “test” her students whether they really understand the topic being discussed. When she is teaching skimming, for example, she retypes all of the texts in the book, each of which is cut into nine to ten boxes as puzzles. Working in groups, students who are already asked to learn the unit beforehand, have to be able to construct such puzzles into a text by finding clues like the topic sentence, connecting words, and the like. When succeeded, students then have to underline the topic sentence, find the controlling idea, etc. as instructed in the book. By doing so, students will not open their book but concentrate on the text that they have constructed.

She also assigns her students to make a presentation on what they have learnt in the Lecture class. When the topic is Reading Tables and Charts for instance, she announces a week before that students need to work in a group of five to prepare a presentation based on one exercise in the book. Each group is required to “teach” other groups and lead the discussion in answering retyped questions from the book throughout their presentation. To make it more alive, before and after the presentation they have to show their “yell”. Apparently, students like learning this way rather than just stick on the book.
Another activity that she sometimes carries out in her class is asking students to find and learn difficult words in the text that will be discussed in the following week. It is intended that by doing so, students can improve their vocabulary. In the classroom, students are instructed to make a group of three where, in turn, each student has to describe the words that have been learnt and let the rest of the group member guess what the word is.

As expected by my university, almost all teachers also try to relate the skills being learnt with the ones that might be needed in the real world, for instance explaining when skimming, scanning and the other skills might be used. Discussion on such matters can sometimes boost students’ motivation in mastering the skills.

Apart from the activities discussed above all of the teachers interviewed stated that they also convey “moral” advice from time to time. It is difficult to tell when exactly they conduct this as such advice generally appears when text with certain topic is being discussed. Once students pointed out that this kind of advice definitely helps them undergo their studies, and creates a particular amity between students and their teacher.

CONCLUSION

The above is just a few examples of teachers’ efforts and creativity to make their class alive; namely, by involving active participation of students as an attempt to give better understanding on the materials learnt. There are many others that my colleagues and, I believe, other language teachers, have and can be conducted to reach the course objective within friendly learning atmosphere, as it has been proven that such an environment will better support for the learning process to take place. So, BE CREATIVE.

REFERENCES


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