

Improving The Students' Ability in Understanding Reading Text by Using Small Group Discussion at Assalam Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of using small group discussions to enhance students' ability to understand reading texts improving the students' ability in understanding reading text by using small group discussion at Assalam Islamic Boarding School of Sumbawa, employing the action research classroom method. The primary aim is to address the difficulties students encounter in reading comprehension and to assess the impact of collaborative learning strategies on their performance. The research was conducted in cycles, each consisting of planning, action, observation, and reflection phases. During the planning phase, lesson plans incorporating small group discussions were developed. In the action phase, these plans were implemented in the classroom. Observations and reflections were conducted to evaluate student engagement and comprehension levels, with adjustments made in subsequent cycles to optimize learning outcomes. Data collection involved pre-tests and post-tests to measure improvements in students' reading comprehension, as well as qualitative observations and student feedback. The results of the research indicate that implementing small group discussions can address students' difficulties in understanding texts. Based on observations, interviews, test results, and the researcher's field notes, the following findings were observed: (1) Small group discussions can enhance students' ability to comprehend texts. This improvement in understanding can be seen by comparing the average scores of the pre-test and post-tests from cycles. The average score of the pre-test was 66.42, and post-test was 68.75. (2) The advantages of using small group discussions in teaching reading are: (a) small group discussions encourage active student participation; (b) small group discussions create an enjoyable and interesting classroom atmosphere; and (c) small group discussions provide students with the opportunity to engage in discussions about the reading text. (3) The challenges of using small group discussions in teaching reading are: (a) students tend to use their native language during discussions; (b) additional preparation is required before implementing small group discussions; and (c) it takes considerable time to prepare for small group discussion.

Keywords: *Improving, Ability, Understanding, Reading Text, Small Group Discussion*

INTRODUCTION

English is the main foreign language taught in Indonesia, starting from elementary school all the way to university. Students generally study English at least twice a week. The importance of English as a foreign language in Indonesia is becoming more widely acknowledged. Students who want to keep up with the rapid progress in science and technology are realizing that mastering English is crucial, as it is widely used in both written and spoken forms to share a variety of information, especially in areas like science and technology. Students need to take a more innovative approach to their learning and be responsible for motivating themselves to succeed in reading. This is the first step they can take. Reading is essentially a language skill. The basic components of reading—sounds, words, sentences, and communicative intent—are similar to those in language in general. Over time, reading has been described as a

"psycholinguistic guessing game," which emphasizes the parallels between learning to speak and learning to read. Advocates of the "whole language" approach believe that reading is a fundamental language skill and should be taught in conjunction with other language abilities, such as speaking, listening, writing, and thinking.

According to the 2007 curriculum, the goal of teaching English in senior high schools is to emphasize the development of both receptive and productive language skills in speaking and writing. The curriculum also suggests that English language components, such as grammar, spelling, and pronunciation, should be taught within both linguistic and situational contexts to ensure their meaning is clear. These contexts should include both the culture of the target language and that of the students. Additionally, the teaching of these language elements aims to support the development of the four main

language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The objective for teaching reading in the first semester of the second year of senior high school, as outlined in the syllabus (2007:30), is to help students understand the meaning of short functional texts and simple essays, such as narratives, explanations, and discussions, in everyday contexts and for accessing knowledge.

While studying English texts, students often face difficulties with certain words, struggle to answer questions correctly, and have trouble grasping the meaning of sentences. For example, when teachers ask questions, students may find it hard to understand specific details, the main idea of a paragraph, the overall content, and the communicative intent of the text.

The writer proposes using small group discussions as a solution to these problems. It is believed that small group discussions can help students overcome their challenges. Through these discussions, students can: (1) actively engage in understanding specific words; (2) better comprehend the main idea of a paragraph; (3) enable the teacher to monitor student progress. If students struggle, they can ask the teacher for clarification. After the teacher explains difficult words and concepts, students will have a clearer understanding, which should lead to improved comprehension and higher scores. Furthermore, (4) small group discussions foster student cooperation and social skills. These groups allow students to share ideas and take risks without fear of making mistakes. In conclusion, small group discussions will increase students' motivation to engage with English texts and improve their reading comprehension.

This study focuses on the use of small group discussions. In the classroom, the writer divides students into small groups, with each group consisting of four students with varying levels of proficiency: high, average, and low. During the discussions, all group members are expected to participate actively and collaborate on tasks. Students with higher proficiency are encouraged to assist those with lower proficiency. By the end of the discussions, the group should have enhanced its ability to understand the text. This article aims to improve students' reading comprehension through the use

of small group discussions at Assalam Islamic Boarding School of Sumbawa.

METHOD

The research method employed in this study is classroom action research. According to Burns (1999:30), action research involves applying fact-finding to solve practical problems in a social context, with the aim of improving the quality of actions within that context. It requires collaboration and cooperation among researchers, practitioners, and laypeople. Kemmis and McTaggart, as cited by Burns (1999:32), describe action research as a dynamic and interconnected process consisting of four key stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection.

In this study, the researcher follows the steps outlined by Kemmis and McTaggart, which involve four essential stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. The first stage is planning. In this phase, the researcher: (1) designs the syllabus, (2) creates the lesson plan, (3) prepares the instruments, (4) gathers instructional materials and media, and (5) establishes success criteria. The second stage is action or implementation. In this phase, the researcher carries out: (1) pre-reading activities, (2) while-reading activities, and (3) post-reading activities. During the pre-reading phase, the teacher explains the lesson's objectives to the students and organizes them into groups of four. During the while-reading phase, students are asked to read the text silently, discuss its content, and answer questions. In the post-reading phase, students complete tasks and share their answers with the entire class. The third stage is observation, where the researcher observes the students' activities in their groups, with additional observations made by collaborators. The final stage is reflection, in which the researcher evaluates the process of understanding English texts through small group discussions.

The study focuses on the second-grade students of Assalam Islamic Boarding School of Sumbawa. This Islamic Boarding School has one second-grade classes, which consists of 20 students. These students tend to be passive and often do not respond well during English lessons. They also appear disengaged with the subject.

They face challenges in learning English, particularly in reading comprehension. They struggle with understanding: (a) word meanings, (b) sentence meanings, (c) specific information from the text, (d) detailed information, (e) the main idea of a paragraph, (f) the content of the text, and (g) the communicative purpose of the text. Data is collected using four techniques: (1) observation, (2) interviews, (3) questionnaires, and (4) tests. After gathering the data, the researcher classifies it into two categories: (1) qualitative data and (2) quantitative data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aims of this research are to determine whether small group discussions enhance students' reading abilities and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of this method when applied to teaching reading. The study was conducted at Assalam Islamic Boarding School of students face several challenges in understanding English texts. These issues were identified during a preliminary study prior to the research. The preliminary findings indicated that students struggle with: (a) word meanings, (b) sentence meanings, (c) specific information in the text, (d) detailed information in the text, (e) identifying the main idea of a paragraph, (f) overall reading content, and (g) the communicative purpose of the text.

The difficulties stem from both the teacher's methods and the students' behaviors. The teacher: (1) teaches reading texts to students individually, (2) dominates the teaching process without allowing students to express their ideas, (3) uses a traditional method of teaching by translating texts from English to Indonesian, and (4) relies on one-way communication. The students: (1) study reading texts individually, (2) passively listen to the teacher's explanations, (3) do not engage in discussions with their peers, and (4) lack opportunities to express their ideas about the reading texts.

To address these issues, the researcher implemented small group discussions. It is believed that this method can help students overcome their difficulties. By using small group discussions: (1) students will become more active in understanding (a) word meanings, (b) sentence meanings, (c) specific information from

the text, (d) detailed information from the text, (e) the main idea of a paragraph, (f) reading content, and (g) the communicative purpose of the text; (2) it helps the teacher monitor students' progress; and (3) it enhances student cooperation and social skills. Small group discussions offer more opportunities for students to share their ideas and take risks during discussions, allowing them to try out ideas without the fear of being wrong.

The research data analysis provided several findings to answer the research questions: (1) Can small group discussions improve students' reading abilities? (2) What are the strengths of using small group discussions in teaching reading? (3) What are the weaknesses of using small group discussions in teaching reading? The research findings are detailed in the following section.

1.1 Improvement the Student's Ability in Reading Text

Prior to the study, the researcher observed that the students in second grade had low reading scores. To address this, the researcher implemented small group discussions to enhance the students' reading abilities. The results from using this method indicated a noticeable improvement in the students' reading skills. This improvement was evident when comparing the pre-test and post-test scores. The enhancement in the students' reading abilities is illustrated in the following table;

Table.1.1. The Score of Pre-test and Post-test

| No. | Explanation | Pre-test Score | Post-test Score |
|-----|---------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 1. | Highest score | 77.50 | 80.00 |
| 2. | Lowest score | 50.00 | 55.00 |
| 3. | Average Score | 66.42 | 68.75 |

Table 1.1 above illustrates the improvement in the students' reading abilities. The highest score increased from 77.50 in the pre-test to 80.00 in the post-test. The lowest score improved from 50.00 in the pre-test to 55.00 in the post-test. Additionally, the average score rose

from 66.42 in the pre-test to 68.75 in the post-test. These results clearly demonstrate that small group discussions can enhance students' reading abilities.

In addition to comparing the highest, lowest, and average scores of the pre-test and post-test, the researcher also analyzed the scores using a t-test for non-independent samples. The analysis showed that t_0 (4.43) is higher than 2.021 ($t_0 > t_t$), indicating a significant improvement between the pre-test and post-test scores.

The findings reveal that students engaged in various activities within small group discussions to understand English texts. They first read the text, discussed the meanings of sentences, then tried to grasp the main ideas of paragraphs. They shared their ideas about the content of the text with each other during these discussions. In essence, small group discussions facilitated multiple activities that aided in understanding English texts. Orlich et al. (1998: 261) suggest that small group discussions can engage previously disengaged students. Since this learning method involves varied activities and interactions, it provides students with more opportunities for success. It is evident that students in small group discussions can participate in numerous activities that contribute to their success in understanding English texts.

Furthermore, the findings show that students in small group discussions gained valuable experiences from English texts. They read the texts from their books and discussed them with their peers. If they encountered difficulties, the teacher would guide them. Through discussing the text, students experienced success. In a small group setting, students can succeed by reading texts with the teacher that would be too challenging for them to read independently. The teacher selects reading materials that are at the edge of the students' reading development. Thus, it is clear that students in small group discussions can achieve success by reading text.

1.2. The Strengths When small Group Discussion is Applied in Teaching Reading

The Strengths of Small Group

Discussion in Teaching Reading; 1). Increased Student Engagement: Small group discussions make students more active. Each group consists of four students: one at a high level, two at an average level, and one at a low level. When a low-level student studies a text alone, they are often inactive. However, when they participate in a small group discussion, they become more engaged. High and average-level students motivate the low-level students to become more active by: (a) participating in discussions, (b) answering questions during pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages, and (c) improving their understanding of the reading text. 2). Improved Classroom Atmosphere: Small group discussions create a more enjoyable and interesting classroom atmosphere. A student studying an English text individually may become bored quickly and may give up on the task soon. They struggle to focus for long periods, which can make the learning experience less engaging. On the other hand, students involved in small group discussions can share ideas with their peers, making the classroom more enjoyable. They also feel more comfortable expressing their thoughts without worry. 3). Opportunities for Active Participation: Small group discussions provide students with opportunities to actively participate in discussions about the reading material. Every student has a role: one as the leader, one as the recorder, and two as participants. The leader is responsible for: (a) guiding the discussion, (b) answering questions related to the task, (c) summarizing the discussion, and (d) reporting the results of the discussion. It is important for students to effectively perform their roles to ensure the discussion runs smoothly. 4). Collaboration in Understanding the Reading Material: Small group discussions allow students to work together in understanding the reading text. The students in a group are highly motivated to collaborate and answer questions together.

They are committed to completing the task on time. Each member of the group contributes their opinions, creating a collaborative environment for better understanding.

In a small group, students can easily communicate face-to-face, which provides ample opportunities for collaboration. (5) Small group discussions help students improve their reading skills. Through interaction in these discussions, students can exchange ideas and support one another in developing their reading abilities. Higher-level students often guide lower-level students, while the teacher provides further guidance on how to enhance reading skills. (6) Students can also learn from each other's understanding of the text. In heterogeneous groups, consisting of low, average, and high-level students, they have the opportunity to learn from one another. Low-level students learn from average-level students, and average-level students gain insights from high-level students. This process of sharing answers and discussing questions motivates everyone in the group. (7) Small group discussions increase students' sense of responsibility for their learning. Each student has a role in completing the reading tasks, and they are accountable for finishing the work together on time. If one student is doing something incorrectly, others are expected to offer feedback or corrections. Active participation in the discussion is essential for the success of the group. (8) Small group discussions also boost students' motivation to study reading. Students working alone can easily feel tired and discouraged without any support. In contrast, in a group setting, students encourage and motivate each other. The collaborative atmosphere in small groups fosters higher motivation to complete tasks. If a student struggles with the task, they are supported by their peers, which helps them stay motivated and succeed.

In addition to the benefits of small group discussions mentioned above, the researcher also

distributed a questionnaire to the students. The questionnaire included ten statements related to the advantages of using small group discussions in teaching reading. The results of the questionnaire are as follows:

Table:1.2 The strength when small group is applied in teaching reading

| No. | Aspects Asked | SD | D | A | SA |
|-----|--|----|---|----|----|
| 1. | <i>Small Group discussion</i> makes the students active | 0 | 0 | 18 | 2 |
| 2. | <i>Small Group discussion</i> makes the classroom enjoyable | 0 | 0 | 3 | 17 |
| 3. | <i>Small Group discussion</i> gives the students an opportunity the participate in discussing reading text | 0 | 0 | 10 | 10 |
| 4. | <i>Small Group discussion</i> helps the students enjoy the process of understanding reading text | 0 | 0 | 7 | 13 |
| 5. | <i>Small Group discussion</i> make the classroom's atmosphere become interesting | 0 | 0 | 9 | 11 |
| 6. | The students in <i>Small Group discussion</i> can work together in understanding the reading text | 0 | 0 | 6 | 14 |
| 7. | <i>Small Group discussion</i> can help the students develop their skills in reading text | 0 | 0 | 18 | 2 |

| | | | | | |
|-----|--|---|---|----|----|
| 8. | The students in <i>Small Group discussion</i> can learn from each other | 0 | 0 | 17 | 3 |
| 9. | <i>Small Group discussion</i> gives students more responsibility for learning reading text | 0 | 0 | 18 | 2 |
| 10. | <i>Small Group discussion</i> enhances motivation in studying reading text | 0 | 0 | 1 | 19 |

Table 1.2 above shows the following results: (1) 18 students agree, and 2 student strongly agrees with the statement, “Small group discussion makes students active”; (2) 3 students agree, and 17 students strongly agree with the statement, “Small group discussion makes the classroom enjoyable”; (3) 10 students agree, and 10 students strongly agree with the statement, “Small group discussion gives students an opportunity to participate in discussing reading texts”; (4) 7 students agree, and 13 students strongly agree with the statement, “Small group discussion helps students enjoy the process of understanding reading texts”; (5) 9 students agree, and 11 students strongly agree with the statement, “Small group discussion makes the classroom atmosphere interesting”; (6) 6 students agree, and 14 students strongly agree with the statement, “Students in small group discussions can work together in understanding reading texts”; (7) 18 students agree, and 2 students strongly agree with the statement, “Small group discussion can help students develop their skills in reading texts”; (8) 17 students agree, and 3 students strongly agree with the statement, “Students in small group discussions can learn from each other”; (9) 18 students agree, and 2 students strongly agree with the statement, “Small group discussion gives students more responsibility for learning reading texts”; (10) 1 students agree, and 19 students strongly agree with the statement, “Small group

discussion enhances motivation in studying reading texts. The research findings indicate that small group discussions effectively engaged students in active participation. Each small group comprised four students: one from a high level, two from an average level, and one from a low level. While the low-level student was studying the text alone, they showed limited engagement. However, when participating in small group discussions, their involvement increased. The higher and average-level students encouraged the low-level student to become more active by: (1) participating in discussions, (2) answering questions during pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities, and (3) enhancing their understanding of the reading text.

According to Richard & Joanne (1989: 84), small groups facilitate active participation and should be the primary classroom organizational structure when reading is the focus of learning. In small group or team learning settings, students tend to generate more ideas, participate more fully, and take greater intellectual risks. Additionally, they feel more at ease expressing their thoughts without concern. Orlich et al. (1998: 257) suggest that organizing students into small groups for active learning helps foster their personal learning strategies and creates an environment conducive to information sharing. Harmer (1991: 245) adds that working in groups increases the likelihood that at least one member will be able to solve problems, and working in groups can be more relaxed compared to working in pairs, as it places fewer demands on individual cooperation. The small group, student-centered learning creates a safe and active environment, allowing students of all abilities to participate freely in the educational process. Knowledge sharing and interaction are crucial for enhancing learning in this context.

Students participating in small group discussions interacted with each other, sharing and developing their reading skills. Higher-level students helped guide lower-level students, while the teacher also provided guidance on how to improve reading skills. Larsen & Diane (2000) suggest that organizing students into small groups enables the teacher to monitor their progress more effectively through questioning, discussions, and assessments tailored to each

group's level. Small groups also provide the teacher with opportunities to introduce new skills at a level appropriate for the group.

1.3 The Weaknesses When Small Group Discussion Applied in Teaching Reading.

The challenges of using small group discussions in teaching reading are as follows: (1) Students frequently used their native language during the discussions. Even though they were reading an English text, they communicated in their native language, "Bahasa Indonesia." For instance, one student might ask, "Apa main idea paragraf tiga?" and another would reply in Bahasa Indonesia, "Main idea paragraf tiga adalah: A young woman went to visit a wise man seeking his help." (2) The teacher experienced difficulties in managing the students during the small group discussions. The results showed that managing the students was particularly challenging, especially in class XI IPA-1, which had 44 students. The researcher divided them into 11 groups, with each group consisting of four students, which made it difficult to supervise all groups at once. (3) The teacher also faced challenges in monitoring the students during the small group discussions. Since all the groups were discussing at the same time, the classroom became noisy. As students arranged their tables and chairs for the discussions, they spoke to each other, adding to the noise. The researcher had to remind the students to lower their voices.

In addition to these challenges, the researcher distributed a questionnaire to the students. The questionnaire contained nine statements related to the weaknesses of using small group discussions in teaching reading. The results of the questionnaire are as follows:

Table: 1.3 The weaknesses when small group was applied in teaching reading.

| No. | Aspects Asked | SD | D | A | SA |
|-----|---------------|----|---|---|----|
|-----|---------------|----|---|---|----|

| | | | | | |
|----|--|----|----|----|---|
| 1. | It requires more preparatory work before implementing small group discussion. | 0 | 18 | 2 | 0 |
| 2. | It requires a lot of time for preparing small group discussion. | 0 | 17 | 3 | 0 |
| 3. | At the beginning of discussion, the situation of the classroom rather crowded. | 0 | 20 | 0 | 0 |
| 4. | The job description of group members doesn't function well, so he/ she can't finish the reading text as fast as possible. | 0 | 19 | 1 | 0 |
| 5. | Sometimes, the group members don't focus on discussing to the certain topic (reading text) but they focus discussing to other topic. | 0 | 2 | 18 | 0 |
| 6. | The discussion in small group is dominated by the high level students | 19 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | | | |
|----|---|---|----|---|---|
| 7. | The low level student in small group discussion is rather passive. | 0 | 15 | 5 | 0 |
| 8. | The teacher gets difficulty monitoring the students in small group discussion | 4 | 16 | 0 | 0 |
| 9. | It can be more difficult for the teacher to evaluate the learning process. | 3 | 13 | 4 | 0 |

The table above illustrates the following results: (1) 18 students disagreed, and 2 students agreed with the statement, "It requires more preparatory work before implementing small group discussions"; (2) 17 students disagreed, and 3 students agreed, with the statement, "It requires a lot of time to prepare small group discussions"; (3) 20 students disagreed with the statement, "At the beginning of the discussion, the classroom situation is quite noisy"; (4) 19 students disagreed, and 1 students agreed with the statement, "The job descriptions of group members do not function well, causing them to be unable to finish the reading text as quickly as possible"; (5) 2 students disagreed, and 18 students agreed, and 2 students with the statement, "Sometimes group members lose focus on the reading text and instead discuss unrelated topics"; (6) 19 students strongly disagreed, and 1 students disagreed with the statement, "The discussions in small groups are dominated by high-level students"; (7) 15 students disagreed, and 5 students agreed with the statement, "The low-level students in small group discussions are rather passive"; (8) 4 students strongly disagreed, and 16 students disagreed with the statement, "The teacher faces difficulty monitoring the students during small group discussions"; (9) 3 students strongly disagreed, , 13 students disagreed, and 4 students agree with the statement, "It can be more difficult for the teacher to evaluate the learning process".

The findings indicate that in small group discussions, students tended to use their native language. Although they were reading an English text, they discussed it in their native language, "Bahasa Indonesia". For instance, one student might ask, "Apa main idea paragraf tiga?" and another would respond in Bahasa Indonesia, "Main idea paragraf tiga adalah: A young woman went to visit a wise man seeking his help." Brown (2001: 180) states that "students in small group discussions will covertly use their native language," highlighting that this behavior is common in such discussions. Additionally, the teacher experienced difficulty managing the students during small group discussions. With 44 students in second grade class, the researcher divided them into 11 groups, each consisting of 4 students, making it challenging to monitor all groups simultaneously. Brown (2001: 179) mentions that the teacher loses control in large classes, particularly when multiple small group discussions are taking place, and this becomes even more difficult to manage.

CONCLUSION

After conducting action research at Assalam Islamic Boarding School using small group discussions to improve students' reading skills, it can be concluded that improvements in reading ability are evident from their performance in reading comprehension and their ability to answer questions on: (a) word meanings; (b) sentence meanings; (c) specific information from the text; (d) detailed information from the text; (e) the main idea of the paragraph; (f) the content of the text; and (g) the communicative purpose of the text.

There are several advantages to using small group discussions in teaching reading. Small group discussions encourage greater student participation. Each group consists of a mix of high, average, and low-level students. The high and average-level students motivate the low-level students to become more actively involved in understanding the reading material.

However, there are some challenges when small group discussions are used in teaching reading. The students often discussed the texts using their native language. While reading the English text, they tended to converse

with each other in their native language, "Bahasa Indonesia." This reluctance to use English made it difficult for the teacher to manage the discussions effectively.

In second grade class, there were 44 students. The researcher divided them into 11 groups, with each group containing four students. Managing all of these groups simultaneously proved to be quite challenging. The teacher also struggled to monitor the students during the discussions, as all the groups were engaged in discussions at the same time, creating a noisy environment in each group. The researcher was unable to oversee all the groups simultaneously. At the start of the discussions, the classroom became crowded as students arranged their seating for the group discussions. In the process of organizing their space, the students conversed with each other, which added to the overall noise and made the classroom situation more chaotic.

SUGGESTION

To enhance students' ability to comprehend reading texts, it is recommended to implement small group discussions. This method allows students to collaborate, share diverse perspectives, and engage in critical thinking, thereby deepening their understanding of the material. By discussing the text in smaller groups, students can clarify their doubts, ask questions, and receive immediate feedback from their peers, making the learning process more interactive and effective.

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