

## Improving Students' Awareness of Functional Literacy

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### Abstract

One of the ironic facts that existed in our society is functional illiteracy. It does not mean that people cannot read or write. People know how to read and write but are unable to understand the meaning of a text they read. Thus, this research was held to answer the question of "How can students' awareness of functional literacy be improved?" This research applied a classroom action research. The results showed that functional literacy was not working due to several reasons such as the students' ignorance of the surroundings, misunderstanding of the instructions, and lacking reading comprehension and language mastery. Students' awareness of functional literacy was improved by implementing regular instructional announcements and reminders. The functional literacy which was also measured from the students' reading comprehension increased from the pre-test, which was 34.09, to 63.17 on the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle and 69.69 on the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle. It can be concluded that functional literacy requires practice and habituation. Students reading comprehension and language mastery are the other matters to be considered in the success of functional literacy. The last, habituation that is directly related to daily life needs sustainable practices, not only in the classroom but also outside in order to become a habit and they can live well in the society.

**Keywords:** functional literacy, reading, awareness

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### INTRODUCTION

Literacy and basic knowledge cannot be clearly separated from each other. Although the term literacy is a part of basic knowledge, it is a prerequisite and also a result of basic knowledge. When people discuss about literacy, it involves productive skills (writing and speaking) as well as receptive skills (reading and listening) (Smagorinsky, 2001) to extract, construct, integrate, and give critique through interaction and involvement in the social practices (Frankel *et al.*, 2016). Literacy develops throughout life. It is not the skill that is only learned in the school years. It makes people to be able to use printed or written information in order to function in the society, to achieve personal goals and to develop personal knowledge and potential (Mukan and Olena, 2016).

Meanwhile, literacy and basic knowledge may work well whenever people are aware. Dourish and Bellotti say that awareness is an understanding of the context of the activities (1992). People need to have awareness or a general interest in others to overcome narrow-mindedness and egocentrism. The availability of awareness can improve the effectiveness of how information is spread in the society and give positive influence on social interactions in the community (Reinhardt *et al.*, 2012). That is why it is necessary to bring about the students' awareness in literacy.

Ironically in a study conducted by Central Connecticut State University (2016), Indonesia ranked 60<sup>th</sup> out of 61 countries about reading interest. This shows that the reading level of people in Indonesia is still very low. Even the functional illiteracy rate of Indonesia is 55% percent of the total population according to The World Bank report (2018). Functional illiteracy does not mean that people cannot read or write. The community knows

how to read and write but cannot understand the meaning of a reading or the text they are reading.

Functional literacy is a set of real skills: reading and writing, which in the context of a globalized world, means from a simple process of acquiring basic cognitive skills to use these skills by contributing to socio-economic development, to develop capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change (UNESCO, 2015). Functional literacy can be situated from educational, social or political viewpoints. A functionally literate person is an individual who is able to read and write well enough to understand any signs, ads, newspaper headlines, and able to fill out job applications, make shopping lists, and write (Groenestijn, 2003). A functionally literate person must be able to fulfill moral obligations including being able to provide for themselves in the society (Johnson, 2016). Higher literacy ability is resulted in greater work productivity and higher incomes especially in the context of employment and economic development (Bravo, Contreras, & Larrañaga, 2002 and Edwards & Corson, 1997).

Bhola and Gómez categorize functional literacy into autonomous literacy, critical literacy, ideological literacy, dysfunctional literacy, document literacy, narrative literacy/prose literacy, numeracy or quantitative literacy, and integral literacy (2008). The low ability to comprehend reading or a text certainly affects many things. For example, the low understanding of literacy (especially digital literacy) has negative impacts such as the high rates of hoaxes, pornography, misuse of private content, to the spread of terrorism or radicalism in cyberspace (Hadi, 2019).

A more concrete example of the poor understanding of literacy in society is that there are still many people who litter in our society. At traffic intersections, there are many motorcyclists who stop in the special waiting areas for cyclists. There are some rules and restrictions when refueling at the gas station but sometimes there are still motorcyclists who operate mobile phones during the refueling. In the researcher's campus environment, there are several students who are definitely literate, but they still park their vehicles in the specific areas for employees and lecturers. There are also university's dressing regulations that are not obeyed by the students, for example wearing sandals, masks, hats, etc. inside the classroom. As what Nafukho, Amutabi and Otunga (2006) suggest that education including literacy need to emphasize on social responsibility, job orientation, political participation, spiritual, and moral values, it is one of our major responsibility as teachers and lecturers to assist our students to acquire basic cognitive skills and to develop their capacity for social awareness and critical reflection by possessing higher functional literacy.

Therefore, the functional literacy of the community needs to be improved. Of course, starting from the smallest scope, like family and school, especially in the university. Therefore, the researchers was interested in improving students' awareness of functional literacy in reading classes, especially for English Education Department students. Based on the background of the problems and objectives above, this research was held to answer the following question of "How can the students' awareness of functional literacy be improved?"

The functional literacy program (Depdiknas, 2009) is developed through a bottom-up strategy based on several principles, namely: local context, local design, participatory processes, and the results of actions. The functional definition depends on what reading and writing skills are usually needed in the learning community. People who live in cities and work in factories and offices clearly need information and literacy skills than people who

live in remote villages. Therefore, each group needs their own definition of functional literacy.

According to Vagvolgyi, *et al.* the factors that influence functional literacy are related to language deficits, general cognitive deficits, and deficits related to numerical ability (2016). Some ways to improve functional literacy (UNESCO, 2015) are effective cooperation, TOT, communication support, teacher training, independent study groups, integrated evaluation, and active support systems.

There are three levels of programs that can be implemented to improve functional literacy skills: eradication, coaching, and independent learning. Basic Skills Activities should focus on the needs of individuals who lack basic reading, writing and math skills. Guided learning activities provide opportunities for students to develop functional competencies to use their literacy skills in everyday life. Whereas the focus of the independent learning activities is in helping students develop the capacity to meet their own learning needs through finding their own reading material needs, joining community development programs, planning their own income activities, and so on (Depdiknas, 2009).

## RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in this research is classroom action research using qualitative-quantitative data. The method used in this research is classroom action research using qualitative-quantitative data. According to Riel (2016) classroom action research is a research that involves a deep inquiry process. It is the systematic and reflective research where its actions affect in a workplace context, such as professional action of researchers. The researcher uses the data collected in order to characterize the forces that can be shared and used with other practitioners. This kind of research brings about a reflective stage in which the researcher formulates new plans for action for the next cycle.

Action research is an activity and / or action to improve something whose planning, implementation and evaluation is worked out systematically so that its validity and reliability reaches the research level. Action research is also a process that includes an action cycle, which bases on reflection; feedback (feedback); evidence (evidence); and evaluation of previous actions and the present situation. The number of cycles in an action research depends on whether the (main) problem encountered has been solved.

This research was conducted in four classes of the extensive reading course of the fifth semester in the 2019/2020 academic year and took place from April to November 2019. The subjects in this study were 68 students of the fifth semester of the English Education Department at Sarjanawiyata Tamansiswa University, Yogyakarta. This action research was carried out in two cycles according to the problems that need to be addressed. There were 66 students who attended the pre-test. While in the first cycle, there were 68 students attended the class and did the tasks given. And there were 67 students who joined the second cycle.

To obtain the data needed in this study, the researchers applied pre-test, observation, interview, written and oral reading tests. The method of presenting the data in this research was descriptive and numerical. After analyzing the data that answered the main formulation of the problem, the conclusions were drawn. Each cycle consisted of planning, action, analysis, and reflection stages. The stages carried out in this research were contained in the flow chart below:

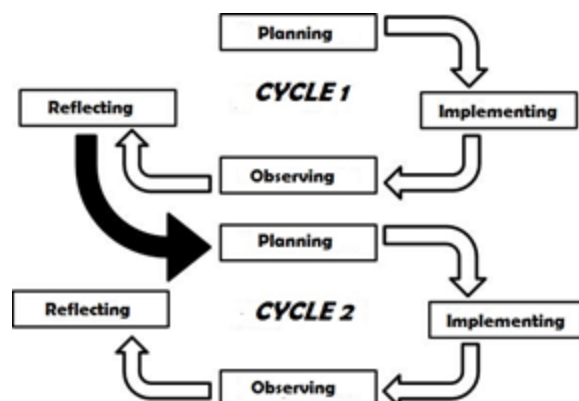


Figure 1. Cycles of Action Research (Indriyanti & Prasetyo, 2018)

Each cycle in this study consisted of several stages. The first was about understanding practical problems and planning solutions. Secondly, actions based on solutions were determined and implemented. Third, from classroom observations the evidence was collected and analyzed according to what happened in the class. The fourth, reflection was done to check whether the solution implemented was appropriate or not to solve the problem. If the problem still persisted, further plans had been made and continued to the next cycle.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following is the description of the results of this research, namely the first and second cycle treatments that include planning, action, analysis, reflection, and re-planning. The planning stage included gathering information sources and libraries, selecting materials that were appropriate to the extensive reading learning method, selecting and compiling lesson plans and materials according to the extensive reading learning method, and conducting a pre-test to understand the situation, condition, and functional literacy problems of students. The action phase was implementing the learning process with the planned extensive reading method. In the analysis phase, the ability of students' functional literacy in the learning process was observed. Reflection phase was to reflect the three stages that had been carried out and the re-planning stage for the second cycle.

### *1<sup>st</sup> Cycle*

The steps that had been taken before and during the first cycle of treatment were:

#### Pre-test and planning

To test the functional literacy of students, then in the first meeting the lecturer (researcher) put some instructions in front of the classroom door, almost all students did not read the instructions in front of the classroom door for various reasons such as the students did not see the instructions, the students thought the instructions were not for them, the student read the instruction but did not understand that it was an instruction or command. Then the lecturer explained the intention and purpose of the instructions posted at the door so that the students were aware of functional literacy.

Then the discussion about reading strategies was carried out to help students to understand the reading text and understand the main idea in each paragraph. One way to assess students' reading ability is by assessing their reading comprehension. Comprehension is a process in which readers make meaning by interacting with text

through the combination of prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text, and the views of readers related to the text (Duke, 2003). While Keenan, Betjemann, and Olson say that “reading comprehension needs the successful expansion and arrangement of a lot of lower-and higher-level processes and skills” (2008). That is the reason why the pre-test was carried out. Gilakjani (2016) mentioned that there are three types of reading comprehension (mental representations, content literacy, and cognitive processes). Mental representation is how the reader understands the text. Content literacy is the ability to read, understand, and learn from texts. The last, is the automatic and unconscious practice of syntactic and semantic rules with the previous knowledge.

In the pre-test, there were five items in the pre-test. Each question only had 1 minute to answer. The first two questions were about understanding the main idea in the paragraph. Students were expected to be able to understand paragraphs and knew the main idea in a fairly fast period of time and rewrote the main idea by using their own words (paraphrase) to develop their critical thinking. The next three questions were questions for understanding difficult words with the help of the sentence contexts and without opening a dictionary. All of these pre-test questions were adjusted to the basic principle of extensive reading, which is fun and fast reading that focuses on the meaning rather than the language (Renandya, 2007) without using a dictionary.

The number of students who attended the first meeting in four extensive reading classes totaled 66 students. The results of this pre-test score were minimal or low. The average value obtained was 34.09 from the range of values from 0 to 100. The highest value was 75 while the lowest value was 0. Based on the results of the pre-test and analysis of student answers, there were many obstacles or problems experienced by students in understanding the questions, such as students who did not understand the instructions, so the answers deviated from what was expected. Many students did not follow the examples of exercises, by paraphrasing the main ideas. The students’ pre-test score is summarized in the table below:

Table 1. The Scores of Pre-Test

The Lowest Score	The Highest Score	Means
0	75	34.09

Departing from the above constraints, a learning plan was developed that aimed to improve students’ functional literacy, especially in understanding instructions. Several different instructions were posted in several different places, such as in front of the classroom door, on the classroom wall, and on the lecturer desk. It was needed to be done to stimulate students’ awareness of functional literacy. Some of the instructions given were “knock the door”, “sign the attendance list before sitting”, “fill the front rows first”, “sit in a circle”, “sit in a small circle of four people”, “ask permission before leaving the class”, “ask for a permission before leaving the class or going to the restroom”.

To cognitively measure students’ reading comprehension especially regarding to functional literacy, students were asked to do several tasks through Google classroom. There were two tasks given, each was reading a short story written by Minfong Ho, entitled *Birds of Paradise* and *Rhizomes*. The selected story was an English story that was still quite easy to read, this was because extensive reading should prioritize reading for joy and reading for speed. The tasks given were different in the first and the second assignment. In the first task, students were asked to make a short summary of the story using their own words (paraphrasing). In the second task, they did not only make a summary but also answered several questions about the story.

### Action stage

This activity was carried out for 4 weeks (meetings). Each week different instructions were posted in different places, from the front door of the classroom, lecturer's desk, blackboard, and wall in the classroom. The reason for this changing placement was in addition to improve the functional literacy of the students, and of course, to increase students' awareness of written instructions that are around them. It was done so that they were aware of other instructions in real life, such as ban of litterings, prohibition of parking, etc.

For the tasks in Google classroom, students received info about the tasks one week before the assignment was collected. In extensive reading courses, the reading process was not done in the classroom. So, students read stories at home. They had one week to read the story and did the work given. In the class, the discussion was conducted. This activity was carried out twice with two different stories.

### Analysis stage

Most students were aware of the instructions given both around the classroom and in tasks in Google classroom. They were enthusiastic and curious where the instructions were posted. Each student entered class one by one carefully and tried to find and examined the available instructions. However, there were still some students who sometimes forgot and got rush into the class without paying attention to the instructions given. For the two tasks in Google classroom, almost all of them (68 students) understood the questions. However, there was still misunderstanding of the story given. The average score obtained from the given assignment is 63.17. This value had increased considerably compared to their pre-test score which was 34.09. The highest score was 83 while the lowest one was 40. This indicates that the instructions and tasks given were able to sufficiently improve students' functional literacy.

Table 2. The Scores in Cycle 1

<b>The Lowest Score</b>	<b>The Highest Score</b>	<b>Means</b>
40	83	63.17

### Reflection stage

In the second to fourth week trials, almost all students were aware of the instructions. However, some of the students were just imitating or following their friends' actions. There were still those who also did not understand the meaning of the instructions. Some students who were not present at the previous meeting could not and were not aware of the instructions, especially those students whose reading ability was low. Therefore, it was necessary to plan an independent learning model that could be done by each student without the need to imitate his/her friend and further to increase students' awareness of functional literacy and improve students' reading comprehension skills.

### *2<sup>nd</sup> Cycle*

The steps that had been taken before and during the second cycle of treatment were:

#### Planning

Departing from the results of the first cycle, it was necessary to plan an independent learning model that could be done by each student without the need to imitate his friend and

further to increase students' awareness of functional literacy and improve students' reading comprehension. Therefore, independency in functional literacy could be increased by checking their functional literacy personally and directly in an individual oral test.

#### Action stage

The lesson plan for students in this 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle was to read a novel outside the classroom hours within three weeks. In the weeks before the due date, students were asked to fill in a progress report form. They had to fill in the development of their reading process. The information and instructions were given in the Google classroom. After three weeks students met the lecturer one by one in the lecturer's office. There were instructions posted outside the lecturer's office which consisted of a higher number of instructions than the previous instructions. In the lecturer's room, students were given a list of written questions about the contents of the novel they had read. This was chosen in order to ensure that the students could perform correctly of the instructions given and improve their functional literacy by understanding the meaning of the questions given and able to answer correctly according to the instructions given.

#### Analysis stage

From the instructions posted outside the lecturer's room, students were getting used to reading any announcements. The number of instructions given previously was only around two or three instructions. In this second cycle there were 5 instructions and almost all students were able to understand the instructions. There were 8 students out of a total of 67 students who did not read the announcement. However, the lecturer reminded them about the existence of the instructions and after that they were able to perform correctly based on the instructions given. In terms of reading comprehension of the novel they read, there were only 2 students who did not understand the story because of their lack of English skills. The average value of this oral test was 69.69. In this 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle, the students' score also increased by almost 7 points from the average score of 63.17. The lowest score in this cycle was 40 and the highest one was 85.

Table 3. The Scores in Cycle 2

<b>The Lowest Score</b>	<b>The Highest Score</b>	<b>Means</b>
40	85	69.69

#### Reflection stage

Based on the results of the first and second cycles, it could be derived that students' awareness of functional literacy had improved quite significantly but they were constrained by the English proficiency of each individual and the continuation of habituation in daily life.

#### Discussion

From the results of the first observation of giving simple written instructions in front of classroom door, it could be seen that the students' functional literacy was quite low. Almost all of them were not aware with the simple instructions given. It reflected of how most of the university students, who are able to read and write, were functionally illiterate. On this first observation, it could be seen that the students were quite ignorant about their environment and they were not able to socially and functionally aware of their surrounding. The excuses given by the students of their functional illiteracy were varied from those who did not read the instructions before they entered the classroom, those who did not see the

instructions in front of the door, to those who read the instructions but they thought that the instructions were not addressed for them.

Based on the results of the pre-test and the analysis of the students' answers on the pre-test, the researcher figured out that there were many obstacles or problems experienced by students in comprehending the texts and the questions even though they had done the example exercises before the test. Most of the students got low scores because they could not answer the questions correctly about the meaning of words and main idea. Another disfunction of students' literacy was that they did not paraphrase the main idea as the instructions given. There were even 11 students out of 66 students who failed at answering open ended questions with multiple answer way. The results of this pre-test proved that the students' functional literacy was low, and their English language mastery was also low. Some excuses given by the students were they felt that the time to do the exercise was too short so they did not really comprehend the questions and instructions given and they did not understand the meaning of some words in the texts.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle, each meeting they got different instructions that were posted in different places, from the front door of the classroom, lecturer's desk, blackboard, and wall in the classroom. Most of the students could perform the instructions given. However, some of them were just imitating or following their friends' actions. There were still those who also did not understand the meaning of the instructions. Some students who were not present at the previous meeting could not and were not aware of the instructions, especially those students whose reading ability was low.

Then, the students were asked to do several tasks through Google classroom and in the first task, students were asked to make a short summary of the story using their own words (paraphrasing). In the second task, they did not only make a summary but also answered several questions about the story. The students were quite successful in understanding the instructions and the ten questions given in the Google classroom. The problem was there were students who did not really understand the story because of the low English language mastery. There were seven students who wrongly interpreted the meaning of the questions given.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle, the independent learning model was an individual oral test to check the students' functional literacy personally and directly. From the instructions posted outside the lecturer's room, students were getting used to it. Eventhough the number of instructions given in this individual oral test was more complex, almost all students were able to understand the instructions. There were 8 students out of 67 students who did not read the announcement. After the lecturer reminded them about the existence of the instructions, they were able to perform correctly based on the instructions given. Almost all students were aware of their functional literacy and getting used to any instructions in their surroundings. In terms of the reading comprehension of the novel they read, there were only 2 students who did not understand the story because of their lack of English skills and their laziness to read the novel. Those two students admitted that they read the synopsis of the novel on the internet because they could not understand the story when they read the novel.

Based on the results of the two cycles, it could be seen that the students' functional literacy had improved from the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle to the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle. The average score was 34.09 in the pre-test and it had improved to 63.17 in the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle and increased again to 69.69 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle. The stages of students' improvement can be seen in the figure below.



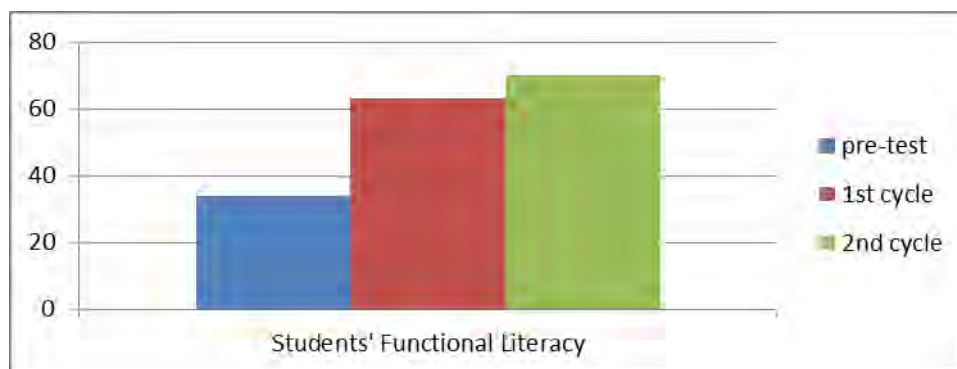


Figure 2. The Students' Average Score in Each Cycle

## CONCLUSION

From the results and discussion, it can be concluded that functional literacy emphasizes students' performance in reading tasks that relate directly to daily life and require practice and habituation by involving reading comprehension skills. The habituation of giving instructions and reminders in each meeting turns out to be able to increase students' awareness of functional literacy through their reading skills. Students get aware of any texts or reading instruction around them. Students' functional literacy had improved significantly from the pre-test to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cycles, from the average score of 34.09 in the pre-test to 63.17 in the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle and increased to 69.69 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle.

Although there was a significant increase in the results of this study, the students' average score at the end of the treatments is still average and it is needed to be improved. Students' functional literacy of simple instructions can be developed through practice and habituation. The habituation should be directly related to daily life and also requires sustainable practice, not only in the classroom but also outside the class so that it becomes a habit and they are able to live well in the society. For improving students' functional literacy of complex and sophisticated longer texts, the students' reading comprehension and language mastery are the other matters to be considered in the success of students' functional literacy. Thus, it is strongly suggested for those who are interested in conducting research on functional literacy to consider about a longer-term research in order to successfully change the habit and emerge the students' awareness of functional literacy. Lastly, it is also necessary to improve students' reading comprehension and language mastery to increase the functional literacy.

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