Implementing basal reading program in EFL upper secondary school settings

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Basal readers have been selected by the school to cope with students' lack of vocabulary size. With some positively perceived learning outcomes, the readers continued to be used from year to year and were decided as a school program, in addition to ELT national curriculum. The research is aimed at exploring the following aspects: (1) the teacher's use of basal readers in the classrooms, (2) the classroom procedures developed by the teacher understudy, and (3) the students' response to the implementation of the basal reading program. A descriptive case study with classroom observation as a main data collection technique was employed to explore the phenomena. The research brings several points to consider. First, basal readers have been extensively used by the school for different purposes: 1) for vocabulary enrichment, (2) for intensive reading materials, (3) as resource making classroom tests, and (4) a basis for writing phonetic symbols, and (5) for promoting speaking skills. Second, the school has developed its own strategies to use the readers with specific procedures. Third, the use of basal readers was positively responded to by the students with some suggestions for better implementation.

Keywords: basal readers, reading programs, EFL Classroom, vocabulary enrichment, Indonesian context

INTRODUCTION

Basal readers, interchangeably with graded readers, have been a subject of critique for their extensive use in L2 teaching among scholars (see, for example, Crews, 1989; Day, 2012). Some scholars negatively perceive the readers due to several factors: they do not represent texts commonly used for real communication (Carrier, 1982); the language used in basal readers is controlled to achieve L2 language teaching goals, and the readers are lack authenticity (Day, 2012), poor substitutes for real literature and lack of naturalness. Regardless of their criticism, basal readers are continuously used in L2 teaching for several reasons. First, since the readers are made at different levels (Day, 2012), all students can read the texts according to their level (Retnaningdyah et al., 2020). This can promote independent reading among the students. Second, the higher-level reader can be used for practicing extensive reading (Hafiz & Tudor, 1990). This means the middle-level readers are used for scaffolding the higher-level readers for practicing extensive reading. Third, teachers are provided with a complete package of materials (Morrow, 1987), which they can use for evaluating students' knowledge and progress and guidance as to how to teach and extend each lesson.

In fact, basal readers are not merely reading materials. They are written with their accompanying manual procedures and classroom instruction (see Shannon, 1989; Schmitt & Hopkins, 1993). With their specific methods and techniques, basal readers are quite central in some reading programs. One of the secondary schools in Indonesia has done the same practice in which basal readers were used for all classroom sessions to replace a national ELT curriculum. The policy was taken to accommodate students' reading levels at the school. Mostly they have not acquired sufficient vocabulary to scaffold English textbooks recommended by the government. After 14 years of implementation, the use of basal readers was reported to help increase the students' vocabulary size. In addition to this, the students are more likely to get more interested in English, particularly in reading English texts. The school has selected some basal readers published in 1980s by Oxford University Press, McGraw-Hill Book Company, and Joshua Morris Publishing.

Research on basal readers in ELT program was well documented in both international and national journal publications. Basal readers are frequently used to develop students'L2 vocabulary (Leung et al., 2011). Since most basal readers in English, most basal readers are used to enhance students' English vocabularies. Besides, they are used to promote students' reading interests (Morrow, 1987). For primary schools, basal reading program is popular. With the combination between images and letters, the students begin to understand that a letter is a representation of an object. Some papers report that basal readers are used as a resource for extensive reading. It is also reported that the readers are used as a reading selection for a test.

The intensive use of basal readers in ELT program has contributed to the students' reading interest in L2 textbooks (Sari et al., 2019), as well as, reading comprehension (Prince & Mancus, 1987; Teigland, et.al., 1971). Since basal readers are controlled in terms of vocabulary selection and syntactical structures, basal readers are proven to help the students acquire both language elements by getting exposed to basal readers. Some scholars also found that some students learn a new culture represented in selected stories. This may, in turn, enhance their cultural competence.

Most research reports on basal readers are centered on the analysis of their contents. For example, basal readers are analyzed for: their readability (Templeton & Mowery, 1985), their gender bias (Hunter & Chick, 2005; Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009), and their lexicon (Leung et al., 2011; Shapiro & Gunderson, 1988), and their assessment test (Flood & Lapp, 1987). These content analysis studies were carried out for different purposes. Some others focus on the effect of basal readers (instruction) on the students' language development (Hafiz & Tudor, 1990), comprehension (Keene, 1985; Popplewell & Doty, 2001), and reading attitude (Teigland et. al., 1971). However, only a few research reports how basal reader instruction is implemented in the context of classroom settings (see, for example, Schmitt & Baumann, 1990). Basal reader implementation is often carried out in language learning, but the type of texts, the type of information in the reading text, and its instruction need to be investigated (Braker-Walters, 2014). Until recently, there is no specific research exploring how basal reader instruction is implemented in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

To this end, the present research explores the implementation of the basal reader program in EFL classroom settings and how the students perceive the program. Therefore, the research brings with the following research questions: (1) How is basal reading program implemented in the classrooms; and, (2) how is the basal reading program responded by the students? More specifically, the research explores how basal readers are used in the classroom and what the teacher understudy develops the classroom procedures. The research is expected to practically contribute to the existing basal reading programs and help EFL teachers or school practitioners understand another dimension of basal readers for EFL learners.

METHODS

The research, carried out prior to the outbreak of pandemic Covid-19, employs a descriptive case study with observation and questionnaires as the main research instruments. The observation was carried out as much as 18 times and was terminated when there were no longer phenomena coming to emerge. In other words, the data have been saturated. The observation focuses on the teacher's activities in the classroom and her interaction with the students. The activities were recorded in structural field notes, and their verbal interaction was tape-recorded. Open-ended questionnaires, adapted from Alwasilah (2002), were distributed to the selected participants from first and second grade to elicit their opinion dealing with the implementation of the program. Fifty-five students took part in the study.

They were purposively sampled from first grade (30 students) and second grade (25 students) with 20 males and 35 females. Thus, the technique of observation was to collect the data dealing with the implementation of the basal reading program at the classroom settings (Research Question #01); meanwhile, questionnaires and interviews were carried out to collect the data dealing with the students' perception towards the implementation of basal reading program (Research Question #02).

Prior to the formulation of research findings, the raw data from different resources were classified into separate files. The observation data, recorded in handwriting field notes, were retyped for easy analysis. Likewise, the interview data and verbal interaction were selectively transcribed. Focusing on the research goals, all emerging phenomena were carefully coded and subsequently categorized. Employing thematic coding, the same phenomena were put in the same categories. The connection among categories was analyzed for formulating temporary research findings.

To validate the temporary findings, the result of analysis a field note was confirmed to the teacher understudy and was

triangulated by reviewing teaching documents (i.e., syllabus, teaching materials, and handouts) and learning portfolios. Furthermore, the result of analysis from questionnaires was confirmed to the students through a face-to-face interview.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present research attempts to describe the implementation of the basal reader program at EFL classroom settings and the students' perception of the implementation of the basal reading program. In addition, the research describes how basal readers are used in the classroom and the teacher's strategies to achieve the school ELT program.

A. The implementation of basal reading program at EFL classroom settings

This section addresses two major inquiries: the teacher's use of basal readers in the classroom and the teachers 'strategies to use basal readers in the classroom settings. In other words, what are classroom activities in the classrooms? The analysis is based on the classroom observations as reflected in handwritten-field notes and evidenced in students' notebooks, as well as revealed from a face-to-face interview with the teachers understudy.

Dealing with the teacher's use of basal readers in the EFL classroom setting, the following findings emerge: (1) for vocabulary enrichment, (2) for intensive reading materials, (3) as resource making classroom tests, and (4) a basis for writing phonetic symbols, and (5) for promoting speaking skills.

1. For vocabulary enrichment

Teachers, as well as students' activities centering on vocabulary enrichment, are evident at most classroom meetings. It is also proven in their learning fort polios in which the list of vocabularies and reading comprehension were written and, later, were compiled. This triangulates the findings from classroom observation. Since the first meeting, the teacher uses basal readers to select essential vocabulary and ask the students to copy them for memorization. To achieve the aim, the students were facilitated with worksheets to fill in and some selected vocabularies to copy. The copied vocabularies can be traced in the students' worksheets and are proven in most classroom interactions between the students and their teacher.

Using basal readers for enriching vocabularies is popular among researchers (see, for example, (Leung et al., 2011; Sparapani et al., 2018). However, there seems to be a closed relationship between basal readers and vocabulary development (including vocabulary enrichment) and use basal readers as its main resources. Basal reading approach (in which basal readers used as its resource) was also used to identify its effect on students 'vocabulary, comprehension, and attitude. Although some critiques are addressed to the use of basal readers for vocabulary instruction, several suggestions were put forward for its effective comprehension instruction (Pilonieta, 2010). Additionally,

content analysis on some basal readers proves that basal readers are written with great concern for vocabulary enrichment. For example, basal readers are controlled in terms of their vocabulary (Day, 2012) repeated from one grade to another grade and given a special space on the last part of the book.

2. For intensive reading materials

Basal readers were used for intensive reading materials with some selected questions to check students' comprehension. The syllabus made by the school outlines some topics for intensive readings materials. In addition, some handouts, and separated teaching materials, specifically made to support their reading activities, strengthen the finding. In this case, the given answers were relevant to the teacher's selected questions prior to the classroom sessions. 12 classroom observations, intensive reading activities were proven once to twice. The activities were found when the students had fully memorized vocabularies from the selected texts. This implies that the following basal readers were not given before the students had fully comprehended the previous ones. Intensive reading activities help the teacher decide when the newly selected basal readers should be presented to the students.

Basal readers are associated with an extensive reading program. They are commonly used to promote reading fluency, vocabulary acquisition, or reading habit. Using basal readers for intensive reading materials seems to be scanty. (Tuğrul Mart, 2015) uses basal readers by combining extensive and intensive reading to reinforce language learning. Day (2012) states that when basal readers are used in an intensive approach, their roles are to provide a source for language study (Day, 2012). This implies that using basal readers for intensive reading materials is common among practitioners.

3. A resource for making classroom tests

The finding was proven in the teacher's documents (i.e. question sheets) distributed to the students. Typed on a one third in –A- 4- small size paper, the teacher selected questions from Basal readers for classroom formative tests. In this case, the teacher developed two types of tests: oral test and written test. The former was employed for vocabulary mastery as wells as for promoting pronunciation accuracy. The latter was used for reading comprehension tests. The teacher makes some questions by referring to the selected texts from basal readers.

Basal readers are commonly written with series of tests (see, for example, Dewitz & Jones, 2013). Testing core vocabulary and comprehension is a part of basal reading activities in which basal readers are used as reading resources as well as a resource for making a test. Flood and Lapp (1987) analyze types and assessment tests and further study the purpose of standardized reading in basal readers. Meanwhile, Leung et al. (2011) use vocabulary tests of basal readers to assess 238 preschoolers from first-grade basal readers. Thus, using basal readers as a resource for making classroom tests seems to be common among practitioners.

4. A basis for teaching pronunciation writing phonetic symbols

The selected vocabularies from basal readers were transcribed into phonetic symbols. The students were given a model of how to pronounce the vocabularies with their phonetic symbols. The activities were evident from the first meeting of classroom sessions to the last observation. Analysis of the students' notebooks reveals that all selected vocabularies were written with their phonetic symbols. This learning fort polio was collected, and, later, checked by the teachers for their accuracy.

Using basal readers to teach pronunciation by writing phonetic symbols seems to be less popular among practitioners. However, some researchers used basal readers as a basis for testing students' pronunciation (Leung et al., 2011). In fact, basal reader has been a part of phonetics methodology. Keene (1985) used a basal reader to know the effect of phonetic instruction on the students' comprehension score. Meanwhile, Lockmiller & Di Nello (1970) used basal readers to implement phonetic approach and try to find its effects on reading comprehension. This approach has nothing to do with the teaching of correct pronunciation. It deals with the teaching of reading

5. For promoting speaking skills

Basal readers were used to promote speaking skills by asking the students to comprehend the texts and retell the story. The analysis of teacher' document support that activity in which some basal readers from lower to the higher levels were prepared. By retelling a story, the students integrate vocabulary mastery, pronunciation accuracy, and text comprehension. The interview with the teacher reveals that only several students were courageous to practice retelling a story. The rest of students end with answering the questions from the teacher-made test based on the selected basal readers.

As the name suggests, basal readers are mainly written to equip the students with reading skills and vocabulary mastery. Unfortunately, there is no sufficient literature supporting the use of basal readers for promoting speaking skills. However, basal readers can serve as an initiating resource for speaking (including writing and listening) to other areas of the curriculum teachers (Pilonieta, 2010).

In respect to the classroom procedures with basal readers, upon completing pre-teaching activities (such as: greeting and checking the roll), in the most meeting, the teacher developed the following activities: (1) asking one of the students to write core vocabulary with their phonetics symbols and Indonesian correspondence meaning, (2) getting the rest of the class to copy the vocabularies from the blackboard, (3) having the students memorize the vocabularies (4) orally testing students' vocabularies, (5) asking the students to translate the texts into Indonesian language, and (6) having the students answer the questions from the texts.

Intensive instruction of vocabulary is believed to contribute knowledge of the content and text structure (Crews, 1989). Meanwhile, translating words into students' mother tongue (L1) is commonly practiced to check comprehension (see Mart, 2015). In addition, vocabulary

rote learning (including rote memorizations on vocabulary) is justified to build start-up vocabulary (Park, 2001). Further, he said: "rote learning is several times faster than learning from context (i.e., from just reading lots of books), and it would be a good idea if we could use this rote learning to build a quick 'start up' vocabulary for our learners. Learners need lots of vocabulary at the early stage so they can work out the patterns in the language (Park, 2001).

B. The students' response to the implementation of basal reading program

The students' response towards the implementation of the reading program is subdivided to (1) the students' response towards the basal readers as L2 instructional materials, (2) the students' response towards the basal reading instruction, (3) the students' response towards the types of reading test administered by the teacher, and (4) The student's suggestions towards the implementation of the reading program.

The students' responses to the basal readers as L2 instructional materials

Most students agreed that basal readers are used as interactional materials; however, they did not agree to use basal readers as the only interactional materials for their reading resources. 48 students, 36 students positively responded to the use of basal readers as instructional materials. It means that as much as 74% of the respondents agreed to use basal readers for their learning materials selected by their teacher. Furthermore, eight students (16, 6%) gave negative responses, and two students (4%) did not give their opinion.

Their agreement to the use of basal readers for their learning resources can be traced from their positive response as follows: (1) more understandable, (2) facilitating them to acquire language skills other than reading skills, (3) widening their horizon, and (4) corresponding with their reading levels. The following excerpts may strengthen the finding.

R#13	:	I like them very much since the books selected by the teacher is understandable.
R#10	:	It's good enough since the content is clear and understandable. They help for those who begin studying English.
R#20	:	By frequently using the books, my English skills improve
R#19	:	I acquire more English vocabulary.
R#09	:	Reading the books can improve my horizon as well as my general knowledge
R#12		The books help beginners understand English texts.

There seems to be widely believed that basal readers give easy access for those who learn a foreign language regardless of their proficiency level (e.g., Hill & Thomas, 1988). Basal readers can accommodate any student's reading level so that they find them understandable. Day (2012) asserts graded readers allow teachers to recognize students' foreign language level of students' reading comprehension.

When they have overall understanding, they develop a positive attitude and increased motivation to read and learn the foreign language. In addition to this, "they make gains in oral fluency, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and writing (Day, 2012)." Thus, their positive response towards the use of basal readers in their learning is rooted in their successful experience in understanding a particular story. In other words, their success stories lead them to give a positive response to the uses of the basal readers as their learning resources.

Despite the positive response to the use of basal readers as a resource for learning, this does not mean that basal readers accommodate all students' needs for reading English texts. It was found that almost all students (96%) did not agree to the use of basal readers as the only recourse for learning English. Instead, they suggest that the school provide other reading materials: (1) readings from EFL textbooks for their school level, (2) Fiction and science fiction, (3) English newspapers and magazines, (4) others (pictorial stories, public speaking textbooks. For more specific findings can be seen in the following Table 1.

TABLE 1 | The reading materials required by the students

Kinds of instructional material	Number of responses	
1. Readings from EFL textbooks for their school level	32	66.70%
2. Fictions and science fictions	26	54.17%
3. English newspaper and magazines	15	31.25%
4. Others (pictorial stories, public speaking textbooks)	9	18.75%

Using basal readers as the only resource for reading seems to be controversial let alone for one year of foreign language learning. Parallel to this, "basal reader cannot be the only component in a well-rounded reading program." Dewitz & Jones (2013) further suggest that additional books should be provided to the students for literary success. In this case, EFL textbooks in line with their schooling level are the most frequently perceived important for their learning, in addition to fiction.

The students' response towards the types of reading test administered by the teacher

Dealing with this, the students were asked about the types of the test that help them improve their reading skills. The answer to those questions, like the other, varies from one student to another. However, it seems evident from the questionnaires that most of the students found that individual test contributed to their reading skills better than the other. This can be traced from their responses in which as many as 37 students (80.43%) decided to choose an individual oral test. Furthermore, as many as six students (13.04%) chose class written tests to improve their reading skills. Meanwhile, as many as four students (8.69%) decided

to choose both individual and class written tests that improve their reading skills. They commonly considered that an individual oral test equipped them with sufficient vocabulary to understand the texts.

R#01 : .. because we can master a lot of vocabulary. At least, we can understand English slogans

R#15: : .. because testing (memorized vocabularies) can motivate me to memorize more. As a result, we can understand (English texts) well.

R#07 : the individual testing since the students can understand English passages, in addition, improve language skills.

High stake tests influence the way how a teacher teaches. It is also more likely to influence the way of students' learning (see, for example, Muñoz & Álvarez, 2010). Oral tests may lead students to work harder than written tests. In other words, it is a high-stake test that facilitates the acquisition of a specific skill/knowledge. Since it is an oral vocabulary test, the students acquire vocabulary more than others. The accumulated vocabularies acquired after getting frequently exposed to vocabulary oral tests may enhance their reading skills. This suggests that when the students have a sizeable vocabulary, the students can well understand the texts because one of the big problems in reading comprehension is a lack of vocabulary.

The types of activity mostly perceived as facilitating to support the students' reading comprehension

Reporting memorized vocabulary activities that were conducted in almost every meeting is perceived to contribute to their reading comprehension. It is followed by memorizing vocabulary, translating English texts into Indonesian, copying the texts, answering the questions from the texts, and transliterating the texts into their phonetic symbols. The following Table 2 represents their holistic responses.

TABLE 2 | Type of activities mostly perceived facilitating

The Types of the activities	Number of responses	
1 Reporting memorized vocabulary:	23	50%
2 Translating English texts into Indonesian	12	26%
3 Copying the texts	8	17.4%
4 Answering the questions from the texts	4	8.7%
5 Transliterating the texts into their phonetic symbols	4	8.7%

The finding strengthens the previous research findings (e.g., Sparapani et al., 2018; Coloma et al., 2020) that there is a significant correlation between students' vocabulary size and their reading comprehension. The more vocabulary they

acquire, the more competent they comprehend the English texts. In respect to this, Sakata (2019) asserts that vocabulary mastery plays an essential role in enhancing receptive language skills, reading or listening comprehension. Thus, any activities to enhance students' vocabulary acquisition (including reporting memorized vocabularies, extensive reading, etc.) facilitate reading comprehension.

The students' response towards the basal reading instruction

The teacher's way of teaching reading (reading instruction) in which basal readers were the only teaching material was positively responded to by most students. It can be seen from their responses. Of 46 students whose opinions were elicited, 40 students (86.95%) gave a positive response, three students (6.52 %) gave a negative one, and two students (4.34%) gave no specific response. They commonly find that the instruction was perceived good (10 respondents), very good (8 respondents), easy to understand (8 respondents), simple (3 respondents), facilitating (2 respondents), elaborating (2), generating competition among their peers (1 respondent), entertaining (1 respondent), helping them read English words more appropriately (1 respondent), impressing (1 respondent), clear (1 respondent). The following excerpts may strengthen the findings.

R #07   :   It is easy to understand and to memorize and the teachers frequently test our memorized vocabularies and their phonetic symbols.

R #06   :   In my opinion, the way she teaches English facilitates me to understand English well.

R #09   :   The teacher's way of teaching English makes me interested in (English).

R#16:   :   It is quite good and the teacher tries to accommodate different English proficiency levels.

Regardless of their positive response, this does not necessarily mean that the reading instruction meets the students' expectations. Some suggestions were put forward in order that the reading instruction is getting improvement: (1) explaining materials and tasks provided (2) practicing to speak and to read, (2) varying methods and materials of instructions, (3) trying not to be too serious, (4) giving motivation, and (5) being more friendly.

The following Table 3 represents the extent to which those suggestions are put forwards by the respondents. The learners' responses pertaining to suggestions and expectations are shared among the students getting exposed to basal reading instruction. This stems from the basal readers as well as their workbooks presented in the reading program. The students highly suggested that explaining materials and tasks is urgent to be shared by the English teachers in implementing basal reading instruction and practicing speaking and reading. Furthermore, multifarious instructional methods, fun activities were also needed by the language learners. In responding to the weakness of basal reading instruction, it is suggested that a teacher should not rigidly follow any single step, as suggested in teacher

manuals. A professional judgment should be exercised when using instructional materials (Dewitz & Jones, 2013).

TABLE 3 | The students' suggestions towards the reading instruction

Students' suggestions and expectations	Number of responses	
1 Explaining materials and tasks provided	10	21.74%
2 Practicing to speak and to read	10	21.74%
3 Varying methods and materials of instructions	8	17.39%
4 Trying not be too serious	8	17.39%
5 Giving motivation	4	8.68%
6 Keeping on the track	2	4.38%
7 Trying to be more serious	1	2.17%

CONCLUSION

The school has developed its way of procedures in using basal readers in the classrooms. The procedures lead the students to acquire new vocabulary. Two major classroom activities supporting the acquisition of vocabularies are reporting memorized vocabularies and translating the text. The former was preceded with vocabulary memorization individually conducted in the classroom; meanwhile, the latter was followed by answering the selected texts' questions. Thus, a gradual step of classroom activities was formulated as follows: memorizing selected vocabularies, reporting memorized vocabularies, translating texts into students' native language, and answering the questions from the selected texts.

The classroom activities are positively responded to by the students as reflected in their engagements in the classroom and their verbal responses. Most students perceive that the classroom instruction was motivating. In addition, it accommodates their English proficiency levels. This implies that basal readers may facilitate L2 learning and, therefore, can be used as a teaching and reading resources in addition to the state-prescribed English textbooks.

The shortcoming was found in the present research, i.e., the limitation of the sample, which was only carried out in one school. Accordingly, further research is suggested to focus on the sizeable samples of schools in implementing a basal reading program to obtain generalizable data.

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