# ENHANCING STUDENTS' READING SKILL THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING BY EMPLOYING *SLACK* MOBILE APPLICATION

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## Abstract

The challenges of mastering reading skill for Senior High School students, which mainly focuses in intensive reading, will not be easily addressed if the teachers always depend on face-to-face interaction in the classroom. The availability of ubiquitous smartphones which loaded mobile applications, including social media, could help teachers to widen their working space, especially in dealing with the limited reading sources available at school, the narrow exposure to reading materials, and the short time allocation for classroom interaction. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the use of social media, particularly *Slack*, as a tool to help teachers create a blended learning environment in their reading classes. In addition to that, this paper attempts to deliver a practical considerations of using *Slack* to assist the teaching of reading. This conceptual paper is supported by theoretical review and empirical evidence which shows that blended learning in reading classes using social media is believed to enhance students' reading mastery.

**Key Words:** Reading skill, blended learning, *Slack*

## Introduction

Reading is one of receptive skills that must be mastered by Senior High School students in Indonesia. To pass the English National Examination, students have to be able to answer 50 multiple choice items, 35 of which are reading comprehension questions from various kinds of texts (BSNP, 2017). According to the data recorded by Ministry of Education and Culture, the average score of English National Examination of Senior High Scholl level from 2015 to 2017 decreased. The data showed that score of English national examination of students' majoring in natural science which topped the rank in 2015 with average 65.83, falls down in 2017 with average 48.21. This decrease is followed by the results of the other majors which also fall. It can be implied from this fact that reading is getting more challenging for students due to several reasons.

The first factor is the limited availability of reading sources. The regulation from the Ministry of Education and Culture number 75 year 2016 article 12 is such a dilemma for many school principals in providing textbooks at school. The regulation is related to the prohibition of selling textbook and other instructional materials at school. As consquence, many schools cannot fully provide the English textbooks for every student as source to learn English. Students relied on the old books available at library.

In conjunction with the limited sources available at school, students' exposure to various reading text is also limited. Zuhra (2015) revealed that students found difficulties in the English national examination as various topics of text are delivered. It needs students'

capability in recalling the information, integrating pieces of information, and making inferences from it. Therefore, she suggested the teacher to give wider exposure to different kinds of texts to help them to be familiar with various topics, features of the text, and the language structure.

The next factor is the traditional way of teaching reading employed by the teacher. Traditional or conventional teaching method is a way of teaching which puts the teacher as the center and does not involve the activeness of the students. Unfortunately this way will lower students' critical thinking capability as they are spoon-fed by the teacher. Besides, there are only two meetings per week which lasts for 90 minutes in Senior High School level. Within this time allocation, it seems impossible for teachers to expose all the coverage of reading materials to students . As consequence, students' problems on reading is hard to be solved.

To address the three challenges above-mentioned, smartphone, a technological device which is used ubiquitously by both teachers and students can be the most helpful tool to bridge the barriers of teaching reading in classroom. Smaldino, et al (2012) highlighted one of purposes in using the smartphone that is to interact and communicate with others as in one hand, there are many communication platforms or the so-called social media, one of which is Slack. There are various digital features available in Slack such as direct call, handwritten notes, pictures, video, and hyperlink with easier, faster, and lighter access of transferring the data. From these features, the reading materials will always be available. The teacher can directly choose and recommend the materials to students by sharing the data or embedding the link. The exposure to more update and authentic materials is unlimited. More importantly, the combination between face-to-face and online interaction could encounter students' different learning styles (Banditvilai, 2016) and strengthen students' metacognitive skill (Smaldino, et al, 2012). This trend offers opportunities to tailor the activities of teaching reading and the features available in social media.

There are not many researchers and practitioners investigating the implementation of blended learning using 'Slack' mobile application to improve students' reading skill in Senior High School context. Considering the positive influence of implementing social media in educational environment, this paper aims at exploring the potentials of Slack and practical suggestions of employing Slack in a blended learning environment to enhance students reading skill in Senior High School level.

**Reading for Senior High School Level**

Reading mastery in Senior High School level is focused on achieving the goal of reading comprehension. According to the blueprint of English national examination by BSNP (2017), there are four cognitive levels that will be examined. They are knowledge, comprehension, application and reasoning. The elaboration of these four levels reflects the macroskills of reading by Brown and Lee (2015:401).

In knowledge and comprehension level, students must know the aspects of social functions which comprises the problems arose in the text, the cause and effect, moral values, and the context of the text. In the application level, students are expected to compare, classify, and explain. In reasoning level, students are required to draw conclusions, detail the similarities and differences, and conduct an analysis of the text. Indirectly, it is necessary for students to integrate the macroskills mentioned by Brown and Lee (2015) such as "recognize the communicative functions of written texts, according to form and purpose, infer context that is not explicit by using background knowledge, distinguish between literal and implied meanings, as well as develop and use a battery of reading strategies".

Particularly in using background knowledge, according to Brown and Lee (2015), it can be done by activating the schemata will help students able to reach the goal of reading comprehension. There are two types of schemata. The first is content schemata which "includes what we know about people, the world, culture and universe" and the second is formal schemata which "consists of our knowledge about language and discourse structure" (Brown & Lee, 2015:392). In addition to that, to support them to think and process new information, students should be exposed to related topic and materials by stimulating them through various strategies such as illustration, DVD clips, slide shows, interactive discussion, and so on (Bridges, 2014). These strategies provide easy access for students and can be integrated into digital platforms.

**Why Slack?**

Slack is one of messaging platforms which can be freely accessed in Android and iOS based smartphone, as well as in the personal computer or  laptop. It allows the users to stay connected each other through direct messaging, file sharing, and broaden their social networking by integrating this platform with the other platforms. It breaks the formal use of email within business interaction and organizational inquiries. Considering the potential of the use of digital devices in classroom and the practical features of Slack, some educators exeprimented the use of Slack in English classrooms.

The major reason of using Slack in teaching and learning is to maximize the potential of appropriate use of smartphones during classroom activities as this device has been ubiquitously used by students. In addition to that, Slack is not as popular as Email, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat and Instragram. However, Kassorla (2016) and Simpson (2016) asserted that it is such an advantage. Slack provides more exclusive, intensive and private students-teacher interactions online as it is not intermingled with their personal life as it is in the aforementioned mainstream social media. Thus, using Slack as a tool to conduct a mixed learning will create a more coducive interaction in online and offline situation.

Several features in Slack are more organized if compared to the mainstream social media. According to Bradbury (2015), there are at least five features in Slack which benefit for blended teaching and learning activities. The first one is *Public Channel*, which is named after the hashtag (#). Public channel can be used for sharing tasks, assignments, projects or open questions and answer. Public Channel can be accessed by everyone clicking the link shared. The second one is *Private Channel.* The invitation and approval method allow only selected people to be part of a certain private channel. Therefore, not all contacts can have interaction through provate channel. This feature can be used as an online forum for members of certain classrooms. The third is *Direct Message* (DM) which provides more private or one-to-one interaction. This accomodates introvert personallity who are not comfortable to have an open interaction via channels. Through DMs, students can directly ask the teacher and have discussion with their friend. Next is *Service Integration* which let the users share files through other platforms such as such as Google Drive, Google Calendar, Diigo, Dropbox, and so on. The most frequent integrated platform is Google Calendar to create announcement more easily and the upcoming class schedule. It can automatically turn on reminders in users' smartphone and it benefits for students' preparation for the next activity. The las is *Statitstics* which records students' activities in Slack. Although it delivers a basic statistics, it benefits the teacher in controlling students' active participations.

From all the advantages, features, and accessibility, Slack is potential to be used as tool for blended learning to enhance students' reading skill in Senior High School level.

**Practical Consideration of using Slack**

The use of Slack in blended reading classes in Senior High School level is customizable. It depends on what method and strategy the teacher used in teaching reading. There are at least three main stages of reading activities happened in the classroom: pre-reading, whilst-reading, and post-reading (Brown & Lee, 2015). By conducting some parts of the reading stages online, it will be beneficial in saving the time and extend students' activities and interactions in the classroom. Several steps will be suggested from the preparation until the closing activity by using three-reading phase technique.

The initial stage of preparing a blended learning class is to make sure that the students are familiar with the application that will be used. Hence, it is better for teacher to introduce the application by directly asking the students to download the apps and register themselves by using the email integrated to all system in their phone. Prior to introducing the apps to the students, the teacher should make his/her own Slack account and start creating public channels to merge all students s/he teaches and private channels for single classes. After the students have the Slack account, the teacher invite their students one by one through emails. Soon after the students confirm the invitation, they will be automatically included in the channels available.

The first stage of reading activity is pre-reading. Pre reading activity aims to make students more prepared in reading class by anticipating the reading topics. There are various different strategies among which the teacher should be aware of which one can be conducted through either online and/or offline interaction. The easiest strategies which can be organized digitally are the ones which are delivered through multimedia. Pictures and videos are the most favorable media among the students. Teachers can download the picture or videos through the available sources which are suitable with the reading topic or create themselves if there is an abundant time available. After that, the teacher can share the media to certain channel. The other strategy is sharing link which directs to certain web page containing a light reading materials which benefits the students to expand their exposure and build their background knowledge. Along with the picture and video shared, preliminary guiding questions to stimulate their critical thinking towards the topic is also necessary. Thus, students are not left with empty mind after watching and observing the media.

The second stage of reading is whilst-reading. This activity is suggested to be done in the classroom as a blended learning actually comprises 55% classroom activities and 45% online activities (Tomlinson & Whittaker, 2016). Moreover, it is considered as the most time consuming activity which often cut the preceeding and the following activities. Therefore, by carrying out the pre-reading activity online, it will give wider space for teacher and students to have more interaction in the classroom. The teacher can strengthen and lengthen classroom activities by conducting group work, discussion, presentation, and so on. In addition to that, teacher can have a confirmation session with students through interactive and engaging classroom interactions.

The last stage of the reading session is post-reading activities. The main focus of post reading activity is to strengthen students' understanding after going through previous activities. This activity can be conducted online or offline depending on the strategies which have been planned by the teacher. Once again, it is important for teacher to consider wisely which strategy can be executed online. Post-reading activity in Indonesian classes are mostly dominated by doing exercises. In doing exercises such as multiple choice, true-false, or short answer questions, teacher can deliver the worksheets online by simply using Google Docs and attached the link into channels. This is a very effective way to do exercises online. The teacher also have an authority to check which students submit it the assignment first along with the automatic

calculation of the score. The other offline post-reading activities can be conducted hand-in-hand with the online ones, such as re-telling activities, writing summaries, modelling process, comic strips and so on. The online platform can be used as sharing media and conducted a peer assessment and open discussion towards the projects.

**Conclusions**

Enhancing reading skill through blended learning by employing 'Slack' social media will give many benefits for teachers and students. The features in the application ease the students to be exposed to various types of reading topics and materials. By using sharing feature, students can have many input from various websites. Other features such as direct comments train the students to be critical and creative in giving comments. It also trains the students to start giving appreciation to other's work. In addition to that, the use of Slack can benefit the teacher to save time and create more effective and controllable classroom teaching and learning. The role of teachers is not neglected as they act as the facilitator who control and guide the students to follow the activities online and offline. The practical consideration of blended learning delivered in this paper is expected to contribute an effective way of teaching reading in Senior High School level.

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