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## EFL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN COMPREHENDING ENGLISH READING TEXTS

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### Abstract

*This study intends to find out the challenging areas of difficulty in comprehending English texts by EFL students. It is further to find out why the students face the difficulties in those areas. The participants of this study were 52 eleventh grade students from a senior school in Banda Aceh. The instruments of this study were a test and an interview guide. Based on the analysis of the test, we found that the challenging areas in comprehending the texts were inference, vocabulary and phrase question, and this question was also classified into the difficult question based on the index difficulty formula. From the interviews, the students claim that they were poor in vocabulary mastery, and limited knowledge in analyzing reading comprehension questions. Furthermore, there were some factors which lead to the students' challenges in comprehending the text. They were discovered to be vocabulary, sentence structure, reading comprehension question types, and, finally, the lack of knowledge and skills in analyzing the text. Thus, teachers must be aware of these problems so that they can assist their students in overcoming them to further improve reading comprehension.*

**Keywords:** Reading comprehension, English texts, reading difficulties.

### INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is the process of extracting idea within a text to get the overall understanding of a text rather than to get the word by word meaning. The comprehension depends very much on the reader, text and situation, where prior knowledge is crucial to give impact on building the meaning on this process as it is constructed within the reader's head (Woolley, 2011). Reading comprehension difficulties are mostly related to the shortage of vocabulary, morphology and grammar; with the shortage, the students will face problem in comprehending the text, moreover to make conclusion of the text he reads (Elwér, 2014).

Some previous studies regarding to the reading comprehension problems showed that reading ability and to extracting meaning from text are fundamental issues that most of the students encountered. A study by Kwiatkowska-White (2008) found that reading comprehension difficulties are found at a variety of levels which consist of poor vocabulary, text base and situational model construction. The study also found that teaching vocabulary separately did not help the students in developing their comprehension ability. Meanwhile, another study by Zuhra (2015) found that most EFL students failed in answering reading comprehension questions because of their deficit in vocabulary and lack of knowledge about the reading comprehension question types. Her data which were collected through a questionnaire revealed that the difficulties faced by the students were due

to the lack of inference knowledge. Lastly, a study by Ika (2006) showed that vocabulary has impact on students' reading ability. From the data displayed through the table of significant, the value of significant was 0,393 out of 5 % (percent), which means that the correlation between vocabulary and reading comprehension ability existed.

It is known that there are still many EFL students in Aceh who faces difficulties in understanding English texts. This can be seen from the low scores achieved from the English subject in the National try-out examinations for high school students this year. About 60% of the questions for the English subject were concerned with reading comprehension. Hence the writers wanted to further investigate the students' difficulties in reading comprehension.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Rubin (1980) says reading is deemed as a multifaceted, active process which includes the carrying of meaning to, and gaining of meaning from the written page. Thus, a variety of aspects are involved in reading comprehension, and as a dynamic process, a reader should acquire methods on how to deal with the text in effective ways. Accordingly, Kirby (1988) mentions that the bottom up scheme is constructed through the ability to understand individual meaning, then the next step is phrase, and the higher level of comprehension is to understand ideas of the text, which is detail conveyed in the written text. Finally, the last two things are the main idea and topic which tell the readers the main message represented in the text.

Reading difficulties has been an issue for many students. Some studies found that children's early attainment of decoding skill is a reliable predictor of later reading achievement (Juel, 1988). It has been well established that skilled reading comprehension requires the reader to be able to process the written symbols of text at an appropriate level. This is reinforced by the fact that poor decoders, both in and out of school, read considerably less than average readers (Beck & Juel, 1995).

Some factors affect students in reading comprehension development. Therefore, students should be provided with the strategy in comprehending the text, as later on it becomes automatic skills that they own (Bayetto, 2012). Other areas where students are empowered are the strategy in dealing with reading text that should be taught as early as possible. Through the process, a teacher can develop student's skill by providing challenging texts from a simple to a more multifarious level. The organized and opened order of instruction could be applied through displaying and demonstration. Bayetto (2012) suggested that the strategy could be modified through a variety of instruction, such as connecting with prior knowledge, predicting, getting the main idea/ determining importance, visualizing, summarizing, synthesizing, monitoring and clarifying, inferring and questioning.

## **METHOD**

This research used a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007; Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). The writers applied this approach to explore the students' difficulties encountered in reading comprehension. They were consented to collect data at Senior High School No. 4 Banda Aceh. The students in this school also obtained a low average score for the English subject from the National try-outs.

A reading test was given to 26 students in one eleventh grade class. The reading test consisted of five areas that the writer focused on in seeing the students' comprehension ability. There were three texts in which each text consisted of five questions that covered five areas of reading: main idea, supporting idea, topic, phrase and vocabulary. The total questions in the test were 15 questions. The questions given were the essay model; this model was believed the most representative ways of getting the result, as the students had to give the answer based on their ability to comprehend the text. After the test, the score were given and the next step was to find out the most challenging part of reading comprehension for these students. The formula used was as follows (Arikunto, 2012, p. 324):

$$P = \frac{B}{JS}$$

Where:

P = Proportions or index difficulty

B = Number of students who answered the item correctly

JS = Total number of students who answered the question

After finding the proportions for each question, the classification of index difficulty was done in order to find out the most difficult reading comprehension questions for the students. The classification of difficulty index is in the table that follows:

**Table 1.** Classification of Difficulty Index (Arikunto, 2012).

Interval	Classification of Difficulty
0.00-0.30	Difficult
0.30- 0.70	Fair
0.70- 1.00	Easy

A few days later, interviews were done with nine students who had with the highest (four students) and the lowest scores (five students). The interview focused on the issues related to reading activities and difficulties that they discovered during the reading learning process. In addition, the second writer also conducted interviews with the teachers which focused on their perception regarding teaching reading and learning process and what might be the difficulties for the students in comprehending the English reading texts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Test

The students' result from the reading comprehension test is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The reading comprehension test results.

No	Questions about	Correct	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Totals
1	Topic	Answers	18	23	21	62
		%	69	88	81	79
2	Main Idea	Answers	10	20	10	40
		%	38	77	38	51
3	Detail	Answers	17	15	9	41
		%	66	58	35	53
4	Phrases	Answers	8	7	8	23
		%	31	27	31	29
5	Vocabulary	Answers	10	8	8	26
		%	38	31	31	33

Table 1 shows that 79% of the Topic questions were answered correctly whilst with Main Idea, 51% were correct. Moving on to Details/Supporting ideas, 53% were correct, however for Phrase questions, only 29% were correct and for Vocabulary, 33% were correct. From this number, we can conclude that the students found the Phrases questions to be the most difficult, followed by Vocabulary. Based on the matrix, the scores obtained for these matters were in the range of difficulties. Meanwhile, Topic questions, with the highest score, were found to be the easiest for the students to answer correctly.

### Interview

Based on the interview conducted, most of the students found difficulties in vocabulary, and this is in line with the result from the reading test, where Phrases and Vocabulary questions were the most difficult ones for the students to answer. Their reason for these difficulties was mostly because of new words that they have to learn. This finding is similar to the research conducted by Zuhra (2015) who also found that vocabulary was one of the factors leading to student's difficulties in reading comprehension. One excerpt from the interview that expresses this difficulty is as follows:

*"Most of the problems that I found in reading comprehension were vocabulary, especially the new words, and I do not know the meaning". (S4)*

The difficulty in vocabulary was caused by many factors. One of them was their reading time that was limited. Most of the students only read English texts in school during the English class, or when they had homework on reading English texts and answering the reading comprehension questions. They also argued that the form of texts taught was not varied; because it lacked variety therefore this led to boredom in learning reading English texts. The lack of vocabulary also led them to fail in extracting the important information within the text. This matter is as the result of limited experience in dealing with a variety of texts because different texts such as narrative or expository will give different concepts. Therefore, vocabulary and word meaning is very dependent on the text types. This is consistent with Kwiatkowska-White (2012) who also claims that students' vocabulary problem was due to their lack of reading experience. This leads into poor comprehension and "results in students' weaknesses in discovering detailed information in the text such as main idea and other important information in the text" (p. 161).

From the interview, the writers also found that inferences become the second main reason of students' poor comprehension; this was the disability to analyze the text. An inference is an idea or conclusion that is made from evidence and reasoning in the text. The ability to make inferences is reflected through the ability to gain the information within text. This problem further caused the students to find difficulties in analyzing the text in order to find main idea, supporting idea, how to make a conclusion from a text and also knowledge in finding synonym and phrases. Zuhra (2015) has also found a similar problem in her study in which she states "student's poor comprehension as the result of disability to apply inference in tracking the information within the text" (p. 151). It means that the ability to do inference is a vital skill that students have to achieve in exploring the text to find any information required.

Based on the interview, only very few students know how to find such information within reading text, thus their answers were still not detailed enough. According to them, the teacher did not explain the tricks or strategies in obtaining the answer of the questions. An explanation provided by a student is as follows:

*"I have never been taught on certain strategies on how to find the main idea, and that is what makes me always fail to answer in the test. Because I take a long time to think about it, and this makes me to not have time to finish the test properly". (S7)*

The above answer indicate that a crucial problem happen within a learning process. To be able to identify and comprehend the text, students should also be taught on the strategies that they could use to improve their reading ability.

Moreover, some causes to these challenges retrieved from the interview data are deduced as follows:

- 1) The learning was not varied in resources.
- 2) Most of the students never acquired the strategy on how to sort specific information in the text.
- 2) During tests, the students did not know how to conduct the skimming process in finding the information in the text. The strategy they applied in reading was the scanning process, and this process took time as they have to identify information within the text, and this implicated on the time provided when they have to finish all the questions. This condition forced the students into rushing time as there was no short cut to be taken to answer all questions on time.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall findings indicated that the participants faced difficulties in vocabulary, phrases and inferences, as among the most challenging problems in their reading comprehension. Furthermore, the students do not know enough strategies to improve their comprehension. Therefore, it is suggested that these matters be the attention of English teachers who teach the students at the school. They need to find a way to improve the students' ability in these areas. Hence, for future related research, it is suggested to further explore a wider perspective on the learning process of reading in the English class, such as the teaching methods employed, material evaluation based on the curriculum and students' perceptions towards the teachers' approaches in teaching reading comprehension. A wider population is also needed to gain better understanding on the findings derived from this study.

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