

The Analysis on Students' Difficulties in Doing Reading Comprehension Final Test

Ratih Laily Nurjanah

Universitas Ngudi Waluyo, Jl. Diponegoro No.186, Ungaran,
50513, Indonesia

Received: 1st October 2018

Revised: 4th November 2018

Published: 5th November 2018

Abstract

Reading is one of skills considered important in language learning and like the other skills, the mastery is influenced by some factors. This research is an attempt to find out the difficulties faced by students in doing reading comprehension to find the perfect technique or method to overcome the problem and answer the research questions (1) what difficulties are faced by students in doing reading comprehension test? (2) what are the causes of the difficulties? (3) what methods or learning activities are applicable in the classroom to overcome the difficulties?. The method of this study is explanatory multi-method strategy by first giving test to students then analysed the results of the test. A questionnaire was distributed to find out students' expectation to the class. The findings show that students face problem related to vocabulary knowledge or mastery. These problems are related to poor habit of reading and less interesting reading comprehension course they have in the classroom. Students need more interactive learning activities to be applied in the classroom such as games, or audio visual media to keep them interested in the lecture or reduce the anxiety. So here, the teachers should be more aware of problems faced by students and provide more interactive teaching techniques.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Reading Skill, Reading Comprehension, Students' Difficulties

Introduction

Reading comprehension is considered as one of prominent English skills for learners. In this skill, students are required to catch some implied and stated information from the text by interpreting or analyzing the sentences to really get the answers for the questions.

Students have various problems in doing reading comprehension test related to their level of mastery. Students with rich knowledge of vocabulary will find that reading comprehension is easy. So will those with good knowledge on grammar. Each student may face different difficulty from others causing different needs on teaching methods and learning activities.

This study aims to determine the difficulties faced by students in doing reading comprehension test to decide which methods and learning activities are applicable in the classroom to enhance their skills.



The problems in this research are lecturer is often unaware of the difficulties faced by students in doing reading comprehension test while to overcome the problems, it is very important to know the causes of the difficulties as well. By finding the causes, lecturers can give students the best treatment to help them overcome the difficulties.

Language Learning

Learning language involves mainly 4 skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Lately, an idea stated that actually pronunciation and memorization also hold roles as backbones of everything else (Boehme, 2013). This idea is quite reasonable since students, during the activities of learning language; they also practice how to pronounce words correctly. In this case, speaking is the mental aspect of putting forth thought into speech, pronunciation is the physical aspect, as stated by Boehme (2013). And students in their learning process, they must memorize everything started from vocabulary to grammatical rules. This can cause some difficulties for students; moreover, the language learnt is not their first or second language.

Some activities or learning methods and techniques are proposed by researchers in previous studies to help students overcome the problems showing up during their learning progress. In speaking class, students can involve in role play or drama activities which force them to create a conversation based on their favorite topics (Hillyard, 2016). The existence of English Conversation Club is also a kind of support for the speaking skill improvement. For listening skill, music can be the best media to enhance students' listening skill (Hidayat, 2013). Related to reading skill, some games related to especially reading comprehension are aimed to help students become more enjoy in reading class activities (Klimova, 2015) Writing is one skill considered as a complex productive skill since it requires the mastery of grammatical rules which can be confusing and frustrating for students. Writing skill demands high knowledge to develop a text that can be gained thorough reading activities (Deshpande, 2014).

Reading Comprehension

Understanding text covers catching some information from text. Reading comprehension demands students to comprehend a text shown by answering some questions related to text. This activity can be difficult for students considering their low frequency of reading habit.

Iftanti (2012), in her study states that most EFL students did not have good reading habit though they formally learnt English at school. It can be caused by less motivation given by teacher or parents at home. Reading habit is a repeated form of reading practice which means the activity needs to be done regularly. Reading comprehension requires familiarity with the topic to motivate students in reading it. Usually people are interested in reading when they think that the reading will be useful for them. This is why the topic given in the classroom should be the one the students think they need.

Referring to classroom activities, reading comprehension involves some questions in various forms. Some of them are; finding main ideas, vocabulary knowledge related to synonyms and antonyms, or answering detail questions.



In reading comprehension, Lee (2017) stated that there are 6 skills considered essentials, they are:

1. Decoding
Decoding is related to an early language skill called phonemic awareness which is part of a broader skill called phonological awareness. Phonemic awareness enables kids to hear individual sounds in words (phonemes). It also allows them to “play” with sounds at the word and syllable level.
2. Fluency
To read fluently, students need to instantly recognize word. Fluency speeds up when they can read and understand text. It is also important when students find irregular words, like of and the, which cannot be sounded out.
3. Vocabulary
To understand what stated in text, people need to understand most of the words in the text. Having a strong vocabulary is a key component of reading comprehension. Students can learn vocabulary through instruction but they typically learn the meaning of words through everyday experience and also by reading.
4. Sentence Construction and Cohesion
Understanding how sentences are built might seem like a writing skill. Connecting ideas within and between sentences, is called cohesion. But these skills are important for reading comprehension as well. Knowing how ideas link up at the sentence level helps students get meaning from passages and entire texts. It also leads to something called coherence, or the ability to connect ideas to other ideas in an overall piece of writing.
5. Reasoning and Background Knowledge
Most readers relate what they read to what they know. So it is important for students to have background or prior knowledge about the world when they read. They also need to be able to “read between the lines” and extract meaning even when it is not literally written.
6. Working Memory and Attention
These two skills are both part of a group of abilities known as executive function. They are different but closely related. When kids read, attention allows them to take in information from the text. Working memory allows them to hold on to that information and use it to gain meaning and build knowledge from what they read. Working memory and attention are part of executive function. The ability to self-monitor while reading is also tied to that. Kids need to be able to recognize when they do not understand something. Then they need to stop, go back and re-read to clear up any confusion they may have.



Vocabulary

Francie (2017) in his article proposed the importance of vocabulary on reading success that can be summarized into;

1. Comprehension improves when you know what the words mean. Since comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, students cannot overestimate the importance of vocabulary development.
2. Words are the currency of communication. A sophisticated vocabulary improves all areas of communication — listening, speaking, reading and writing.
3. When children and adolescents improve their vocabulary, their academic and social confidence and competence improve, too.

It shows that Vocabulary represents one of most important skills necessary for teaching and learning a foreign language. It is the basis for the development of all the other skills: reading comprehension, listening comprehension, speaking, writing, spelling and pronunciation. Vocabulary is the main tool for the students to use English effectively.

Intentional vocabulary acquisition is memorizing straightforwardly term after term with their respective translations from a list. Intentional learning is quick and usually preferred by learners, but it is also superficial. Learners find vocabulary in an isolated, often infinitive form and remain incapable of using it correctly in context. Moreover, intentionally learned vocabulary sinks faster. Recommendable vocabulary acquisition pushes learners to every term, embedding it deeply and solidly in the mental lexicon (Aitchison in Alizadeh, 2016). In other words, students are expected not only memorize the words and the meanings but also use them in the correct context.

According to a research done by Rohmatillah (2014), there are some factors causing difficulties in learning vocabulary (1) the difference between written form and the spoken form in English, (2) the large number of words students have to learn or master, (3) the limited knowledge about words, (4) the complexity of word knowledge. Knowing a words involves much more than knowing its dictionary definition, (5) causes of lack of understanding of grammatical of the words, (6) the incorrect pronunciation is often caused by the lack of sound similarity between English and the students' native language. From the factor number 3, it is clearly stated that knowledge of vocabulary is really important in the process of mastering vocabulary.

Some previous studies proposed games as media to teach vocabulary. A study held by Silsüpür (2017) found that in reality, there was not a significant difference between the results of the quiz. Similarly, the findings of the questionnaire indicated that the participants preferred learning through vocabulary games rather than traditional way. The findings also revealed that games reduce negative feelings during the learning process. It suggested that teachers should reconsider the role of games and appreciate their educational value. In other words, negative feelings can also influence the process of learning in the classroom and fun activities such as game can reduce the feelings to make students feel more comfortable and master or understand the lesson better.

Mauli, et al (2014) in her research about Students' Difficulties In Finding Main Ideas, found that there were 6 problems faced by students; low interest in



reading, poor knowledge on vocabulary, long sentences, poor reading strategy, grammatical confusion, and poor knowledge on paragraph. The results showed that the 8th grade students felt difficult in finding main ideas because they did not know the meaning of main idea and many difficult words causing difficulties to find main ideas in the text. From this research, it can be seen that vocabulary is also one of big problems faced by students in reading comprehension. This shows that there is need to overcome the problem.

AlQahtani (2015) stated that vocabulary learning is an essential part in foreign language learning as the meanings of new words are very often emphasized, whether in books or in classrooms. It is also central to language teaching and is of paramount importance to a language learner. Recent research indicate that teaching vocabulary may be problematic because many teachers are not confident about best practice in vocabulary teaching and at times don't know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on word learning (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008)

Method

The subjects of this study were 8 second-semester students of English Literature at Universitas Ngudi Waluyo. This study adapts explanatory multi-method strategy proposed by Creswell (Hung, 2012).

After finishing one semester teaching and learning process, students took final examination to measure their progress of learning. The test consisted of deciding main idea, finding antonyms, using words based on context, answering questions about details mentioned in the text, completing sentences and completing part of speech table. The results were then checked to get the score. Each result was then analysed by checking the test item one by one. The number of wrong answers in each section from each results was then noted to determine which section consisted the most wrong answers and the least one.

Students were then given open-answer questionnaires helping to reveal their opinions on reading comprehension skill. The questionnaires asked some questions about how they viewed reading comprehension skill, which was the most difficult part of the test, what is the interesting part of reading comprehension practice in the classroom, how they viewed the lecturer's ways of teaching and what learning activities they enjoyed and expected the most for reading comprehension practice.

The answers from the questionnaires were listed and compared to the list of section with wrong-answers numbers.



Findings and discussion

What are the Difficulties Faced by Students?

From the test results, the following list is made (in order):

Table1. Section with the number of wrong-answers

| Section | Number of Wrong Answers (from 5 questions) | | | | | | | | Average of Wrong Answers |
|--|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------------------------------|
| | Std.1 | Std.2 | Std.3 | Std.4 | Std.5 | Std.6 | Std.7 | Std.8 | |
| Finding Main Idea | 3 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 3.5 |
| Vocabulary (Antonyms) | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 4.1 |
| Using Words in Context | 4 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 4 |
| Answering Detail Questions | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1.8 |
| Cloze Reading (Completing Sentence) | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3.4 |
| Completing Part of Speech Table | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3.5 |



Table 2. The most difficult session (in order)

| Rank | Session |
|------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Vocabulary |
| 2 | Using words in context |
| 3 | Finding Main Idea |
| 3 | Completing Part of Speech |
| 4 | Close Reading |

From the test results, it can be seen that the most difficult session for the students is Vocabulary session followed by Using Words in Context, Finding Main Idea, Completing Part of Speech, and Close Reading.

What are the causes of the difficulties?

To answer this question, a questionnaire was distributed containing question for each session.

Vocabulary and Using Words in Context

“Why do you think Vocabulary and Using Words in Context sessions are difficult?”

| Options | Number of Respondents |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Limited knowledge of words | 4 |
| 2. Lack of memorizing ability | 3 |
| 3. Not familiar with the topic | 1 |

The results show that students feel difficult to do vocabulary session because they have limited knowledge of words. It is hard for them to memorize new words and differentiate the meaning especially in English there are some words with similar meanings but they cannot be used in same context.

Adjusting which words to use related to the context of the sentence sometimes is not as easy as it seems. Students need to understand the whole meaning if a word.

And memorizing new words is difficult for some students. Some of them rarely meet new words because of lack habit of reading and using new words. The new words memorized are easily forgotten due to lack of usage. The students might have memorized it but they rarely or even never use it in their daily conversation nor writing activities. They keep using the words they are familiar with without realizing that this habit can cause less improvement in their language skill related to limited vocabulary knowledge.



Reading activity is considered being able to improve vocabulary knowledge as well as listening activity. Those 2 kinds of activities helps students adding new vocabulary.

The vocabulary knowledge mastered by students influences their ability to use words or new words in context. It is related to their ability to understand the meaning(s) of a word and use it according to the message of the sentence. This session seems difficult for students because the students have lack knowledge of vocabulary caused by the low frequency of doing activities improving their knowledge.

Finding Main Ideas

“Why do you think Finding Main Idea session is difficult?”.

| Options | Number of Respondents |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Lack of knowledge | - |
| 2. Length of sentence | - |
| 3. Poor reading skill | - |
| 4. Paraphrase confusion | 8 |

From the results, it can be seen that students get confused in doing Finding Main Idea session because they cannot paraphrase the main sentence in the text. Since the main idea is different from main sentence, they have to interpret the paraphrased form of the main sentence. And sometimes they misinterpret the form. They cannot relate the paraphrased from to the main sentence stated in the text.

This problem can be caused by their poor ability in understanding sentence and catching the implied meaning of a sentence. Low frequency of reading can also cause this problem so the students do not get used to reading and catch the meaning of sentences they read.

Completing Part of Speech

“Why do you think Completing Part of Speech session is difficult?”

| Options | Number of Respondents |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Poor knowledge of vocabulary | 7 |
| 2. Poor ability on memorizing | - |
| 3. Poor knowledge on grammar | 1 |

The students feel that their poor knowledge on vocabulary affects their ability to do the session. This can appear in some forms; they have seen the words before but they do not know the meaning, they know the meaning but they do not know the form of the words in different part of speech, or they are not familiar with the words.



Since the problem relates to vocabulary, this leads to the argument that the poor knowledge is caused by poor reading habit.

Close Reading

“Why do you think Close Reading session is difficult?”

| Options | Number of Respondents |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Paraphrase confusion | 4 |
| 2. Grammatical confusion | 2 |
| 3. Lack of knowledge of vocabulary | 2 |

Based on the results, paraphrased sentences cause confusion for students. They understand the sentence in the text but one it is paraphrased, they become confused. Paraphrasing can cause another problem related to unfamiliarity with the words used in paraphrased-sentence. Students need to find the paraphrased sentence having the same meaning with the sentence in the text though it has different words.

What Methods or Learning Activities are Applicable in the Classroom to Overcome the Difficulties?

From the results, the main problem faced by students is related to vocabulary knowledge. This can be caused by their low frequency of reading activities. Reading can help students to gain more new words and their determination to master vocabulary should support them to find some ways to reach it. Some students will have a mini dictionary to write all the new words they find during reading activities along with the meanings of the words after they look up in the dictionary.

This activity should be initiated from the classroom by the lecturer. Some activities can be applied to motivate students to read and help them memorize the vocabulary.

One of the most applicable way considered fun by students and lecturers is by doing some games instead of reading and discussing. This idea is drawn from the results of questionnaire given to students. The results are shown below.

Q: What activities do you expect to help you enjoy reading activities in the classroom?



| Responses | |
|-----------|----------------------------------|
| S1 | 1. Audio-Visual supports, games. |
| S2 | 2. Games |
| S3 | 3. Video |
| S4 | 4. Games, Video |
| S5 | 5. Songs, games, video |
| S6 | 6. Video, games |
| S7 | 7. Video |
| S8 | 8. Games and videos |

The responses from students give a hint of what make the enjoy reading class better. Some games can be used as a learning media especially in improving their knowledge of vocabulary, such as; Taboo Words, Chaining Words, and many more. It takes creativity from teachers to get students involved in this interactive forms of learning.

Conclusion

From the research, it can be concluded that all of the students' difficulties in reading comprehension test is caused by vocabulary, especially the limited knowledge or mastery of vocabulary.

In order to overcome the problems, students propose an interactive learning for reading activities, both in forms of audio visual and games. Although games are not proven to improve their ability in mastering vocabulary, it can help them enjoy the class better resulting a little improvement though it is not significant.

Teachers as the provider of facilities should be aware of this needs and become more creative in term of providing and involving students in interactive techniques or methods or teaching activities.

References

- Alexander, Francie. (2018). Understanding Vocabulary. Retrieved from <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching.../understanding-vocabulary>
- AlQahtani, Mofareh. (2015). The Importance of Vocabulary in Language Learning and How to be Taught. International Journal of Teaching and Education. 3(3). Retrieved from <https://www.iises.net/international-journal-of-teaching.../publication-detail-213>
- Boehme, Martin. (2013). 6 Essential Skills for Language Learning. Retrieved from [on powlyglot.com/6-essential-skills-for-language-learning](http://powlyglot.com/6-essential-skills-for-language-learning)



- Deshpande, Shubhada. (2014). Teaching Writing Skills in English: Involvement of Students in the Assessment and Correction of Their Own Errors. *European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (eajournals)*. 3(1). pp.68-73. Retrieved from <http://www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/Teaching-Writing-Skills-in-English-Involvement-of-Students-in-the-Assessment-and-Correction-of-Their-Own-Errors.pdf>
- Essays, UK. (November 2013). The Importance Of Teaching And Learning Vocabulary English Language Essay. Retrieved from <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-language/the-importance-of-teaching-and-learning-vocabulary-english-language-essay.php?vref=1>
- Hidayat, Apin. (2013). The Use of Songs in Teaching Students' Listening Ability. *Journal of English and Education*. 1(1). pp.21-29. Retrieved from <https://media.neliti.com/media/publications/192620-EN-the-use-of-songs-in-teaching-students-li.pdf>.
- Hillyard, S. (2016). English through Drama: Creative Activities for Inclusive ELT Classes. *ELT Journal*. 71(3). pp.393-395. Retrieved from <https://academic.oup.com/eltj/article-abstract/71/3/393/3098253>
- Hung, Nguyen Viet. (2012). A Mixed Approaches Method Used to Investigate Teacher Cognition of English Language Teaching. *English Language Teaching*. 5(11). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1080095.pdf>
- Iman Alizadeh. (2016). Vocabulary Teaching Techniques: A Review of Common Practices. *International Journal of Research in English Education*, 1(1), Retrieved from ijreeonline.com/article-1-25-en.pdf
- Klimova, Blanka. (2015). Games in Teaching of English. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 191(1). pp. 1157-1160. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042815025720>
- Lee, Andrew, M.I. (2017). <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/reading-issues/6-essential-skills-needed-for-reading-comprehension>
- Mauli, Rima, Cucu Sutarsyah, Ujang Suparman. (2014) An Analysis of Students' Problems in Finding Main Idea of Reading Text. *Jurnal FKIP UNILA*, 7(2) Retrieved from jurnal.fkip.unila.ac.id/index.php/123/article/view/6517
- Silsüpür, Beyza. (2017). Does Using Language Games Affect Vocabulary Learning in EFL Classes? *Journal of Foreign Language Education and Technology*, 2(1), Retrieved from dergipark.gov.tr/download/article-file/285655

