



Students' Abilities and Difficulties in Comprehending English Reading Texts at Secondary Schools; An Effect of Phonemic Awareness

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Abstract

Reading comprehension in the EFL context requires abilities not only linguistic competences but also reading strategies. The timely acquisition of this competence has a crucial effect for language learners. Unfortunately, most language learners in all level have low skills and high difficulties to acquire reading skills. This study aims to explore students' abilities and difficulties in comprehending English reading texts as secondary level. This study is categorized as qualitative study consisting of three main data gathering methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and group discussions. The data collected then are analyzed in stages, namely data condensation, data display, and data conclusion. Based on the result of analysis, this study showed that students have low reading achievement at secondary level. The low achievement is affected by some reading difficulties such as low reading exercises, unwilling to read out loud, low reading skills, low vocabulary, low phonemic awareness, low reading strategies, and low grammatical competence. For further studies, reading exercises and phonemic awareness in reading activities should be paid attention with giving students with various reading texts to train them comprehend EFL texts.

Keywords: reading achievement; reading difficulties; reading strategies

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INTRODUCTION

Reading constitutes one of the four language skills that are acquired by learners through English learning process in schools. Reading relates to recognize morphemes, words, and phrases to construct meaning (Nation, 2006). If learners read a text and answer reading questions or retell facts, they are assumed as good comprehender (Schmidtke & Moro, 2021). To be a good comprehender is a hope for language learners. Nevertheless, reading comprehension involves complex metacognitive and cognitive processes (Sparks, 2019; Haerazi & Irawan, 2020). Through reading, learners can get more knowledge and information from books, magazines, newspapers, and many sources. By reading too, learners can improve their experiences, develop new insights, solve problems, and elevate their critical thinking. When learners read a text, the results of reading activities can

underpin their writing skills and develop their vocabulary and grammar (Rohmah, 2018; Ambarini et al., 2018; Kho et al., 2021; Nayan & Krishnasamy, 2015).

For EFL learners, reading doesn't mean to comprehend the meaning of vocabulary or words or phrases but understand the content of information written explicitly and implicitly in paragraphs or texts (Haerazi et al., 2019; Thamrin & Agustin, 2019). Besides, EFL learners should understand how reading comprehension activities are carried out (Danuwijaya, 2018). According to Dewle (2018), comprehension activities in reading consist of three level; namely literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, and evaluation. The three activities help learners to acquire comprehension of contents of the texts being read. Besides, it can facilitate learners to perform better speaking and listening skills in EFL contexts (Rahmawati, 2018; Ulfiati, 2018). Learners are demanded to have good comprehension to comprehend texts obtaining messages or information. Therefore, reading skills should be mastered seriously in order to help learners understand texts written in English.

According to theory of automaticity in reading, readers who have proficient word decoding will help them to decode words with minimal attention to decoding activities (Rawian et al., 2018). Another reading aspect determining comprehension is reading speed. Learners who read slowly very often fail to accomplish their reading tasks and lose motivation to continue reading activities (Zulfan, 2018; Begum & Hamzah, 2018). In reading activities, effective reading rate derives from the efficiency of decoding processes and comprehension (Surtantini, 2019; Sumekto, 2018). Poor readers will have slow reading of connected sentences in paragraphs (Syafii, 2018; Khan et al., 2018). Therefore, speed reading or reading rate play important role in comprehending texts for EFL learners.

Dealing with effective reading activities mentioned, English teachers employ various reading strategies to help learners to comprehend texts. The reading strategies employed by teachers can also become learners' problem to comprehend English texts. Therefore, this study investigated the learners' reading achievement after applying those strategies and find out learners' difficulties in reading skills encountered by learners at senior high school level. The reading achievement of learners are identified from the learners' reading achievement after implementing various strategies in the school. Thus, the information of learners' difficulties is attained in line with real problems faced by learners during and after implementing various reading strategies.

METHOD

This study aims to find out students' reading achievement and difficulties in reading comprehension at the secondary level. The descriptive qualitative study was applied to explore the data. The data consist of information dealing with students' reading achievement and difficulties in reading comprehension in relation to phonemic awareness. To gain the data, researchers employ semi-structure interview, classroom observation, and assessment artefacts. Researchers in this study take positions as human instrument in which they construct meaning-making, sense-making, attributional activities deriving from what English teachers have been said (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2016). All data were interpreted by researchers in the form of words, sentences, and paragraphs in order to be able to be understood by readers.

The source of the data is the subject where the data to get. It is the important thing in research. The sources of this research data are the secondary schools in the Sakra Timur area, East Lombok. The primary source of data derived from learners who have been taking reading subject. Researchers observed learners' abilities and difficulties faced and factors of causing students' difficulties in comprehending reading texts. Researcher applied documents using subjects' grade transcript or scoring data to know learners' initial reading

skills after implementing various reading strategies. Also, researchers interviewed learners to examine more closely their difficulties in reading comprehension. 35 learners were as respondents and they were involved in classroom observation and interview activities.

In this study, the researcher use data analysis technique based on Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2016), which involves three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion/verification. Data reduction means the process of selecting, identifying, classifying and coding the data which relates to research issues. Researcher select the data that give valuable information in in this study. Based on the concept of data reduction, researchers identified learners' reading achievement and collected information of their difficulties in comprehending English reading texts. After reducing the data, the data are then displayed. The data are displayed in narrative style. The narration of the data allows talking conclusion of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In presenting the data, researchers described the data reflecting and showing students' abilities and difficulties in comprehending English reading texts in the form of description or narration. Researchers then categorized students' reading comprehension of texts with getting the appropriate scores from the students' reading achievement. The last step in data analysis was drawing conclusions and verification. The data which had reduce and display are concluded. The conclusion then was verified whether the data had answered the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Reading Achievement at Secondary Level

Researchers classified research findings into some points consisting of students' ability to comprehend English reading texts, students' difficulties in comprehending English reading texts, and factors of causing the students difficulties in comprehending English reading texts. Obtaining the data, researchers used the document to analyze students' ability and difficulties in comprehending English reading texts. Researchers took students' worksheets for the test. Reading the descriptive text that had been received before. The researcher also used the interview to know the factors of causing the students' difficulties in comprehending English reading texts. The subject of this research is limited to the second grade students of Sakra Timur.

Below is the students' reading achievement which was taken from English teachers. Researcher has identified students' reading achievement from semester 1 and 2 spreading in different classes. Based on the document artefacts, the mean score of students' reading achievement in semester 1 and 2 was 73. The reading test was carried out twice in order to pass the passing grade. The passing grade was enacted in 75 for English subject. It can be categorized that students are below reading achievement. It means students have difficulties in reading comprehension. Figure 1 showed that students in English classes had low reading comprehension.

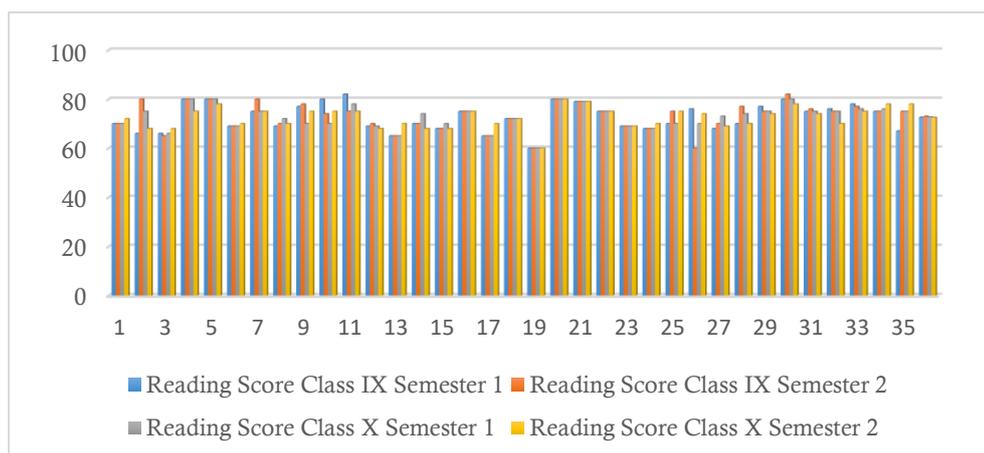


Figure 1. Students' Reading Achievement in Semester 1 and 2

The data were collected from the students score. The data was taken from 140 students' secondary schools consisting of 75 female students and 65 male students. The data show that the highest score is 90 and the lowest is 60. If the data are gained compared to the passing grade, 64 students passed the minimal criteria score (± 75). It can be concluded that most students at the secondary school level had difficulties in reading comprehension. The gender types seemed have no significant effect on reading skills in this current study although researchers did not seriously pay attention to this case. Therefore, this study was followed in investigating students' difficulties in reading comprehension.

Students' Difficulties in Reading Comprehension

The students' difficulties in reading comprehension are classified into four main points, namely difficulties in determining main idea, understanding vocabulary, making inference, and detailing information from texts being read. Each point has different actuation of difficulties. For instance, in determining main idea, students faced difficulties because they do not have reading habit and low motivation to read. In the case of vocabulary, students had low vocabulary acquisition because they did not accustom their selves to read academic discourses or texts. The lack of reading habit, motivation, vocabulary acquisition caused students difficulties in making inferences about the content of the text being read. Because of this, students also faced difficulties in detailing information from the texts. Therefore, students' reading achievement in semester 1 and 2 had been under performed and had not passed the passing grade for the English subject matter at the secondary school level. The elaboration of these difficulties was explored in the discussion part of this article.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate students' reading achievement and difficulties in reading comprehension at the secondary school level. 140 students were involved in this study to see their reading achievement. Each class consisted of 35 students joining in reading classes. Based on the document artefacts, the mean score of reading achievement in semester 1 from four classes was 73. It was under performed in line with 75 of passing grade. It is also the same mean score in reading achievement in semester 2 which was 73. Although, teachers have been applying various strategies in developing students' reading achievement. The data of this study showed that students need to

improve their reading skills and reading strategies. After categorizing students' achievement, this study can be stated that students' reading achievement were less. It means students faced difficulties in comprehending English reading text.

The existing learning-teaching strategies at the secondary school level are oriented to comprehend generic structures of the reading texts. Students are asked to identify kinds of texts such as generic structure of descriptive texts, recount texts, exposition texts, and procedural texts. These learning strategies were, according to English teachers' interview, designed just to elaborate the building knowledge of the text before reading activities. Building knowledge of the text is needed to help students understand what text types they read. It is in line with Akyol and Boayaci (2019), who state students must be involved in understanding the text types before doing reading activities so that they can guess the plot of story or information order from the texts being read. In English teachers' perception, teaching reading skills is oriented to construct meaning building processes in which students' background knowledge is confirmed (Chaudhry & Al-Adawani, 2019). Unfortunately, the present study indicated that the teaching-learning strategies employed were not effective to improve students' achievement.

Dealing with reading difficulties, students faced problems not only relating to linguistic aspects but also reading strategies applied in reading activities. Students felt that they did not enjoy reading activities and reading exercises provided by teachers inside or outside the class. They felt reading tasks are boring activities because they had lack of word recognition. It is in line with Cain (2010); Cooney et al. (2018), and Akyol & Kayabasi (2018) who informed that learners should recognize words first and foremost because it helped learners construct meaning by building their mental lexicon. Besides, students' inability to recognize new English vocabulary was due to their writing and reading activities. In this case, teachers tried to promote students to focus on reading objectives, reading strategies, and the ways of achieving comprehension. This finding was in line with Yang et al. (2016); Wiles, Allen, and Butler (2016), who found readers faced difficulties in understanding academic texts if they had lack of reading and writing exercises.

The lack of reading exercises and the minimum word recognition affected students to determine main idea of texts accurately. This case was faced by students in determining main idea of paragraphs. The difficulties of determining main idea were caused by factors such as reading words completely inaccurately, deficiencies in word recognition, much time for comprehension, and careless of punctuation marks, stress, and intonation (Misbah, 2017; Sumarsono et al., 2019). These findings were seen when students are asked to read simple descriptive texts. Students experienced confusion of word meaning compiled in sentences. Because of this, students experienced inability to connect topic sentences and ideas in a passage. Therefore, students felt uneasy to determine main ideas in reading passages. Consequently, they experienced difficulties in reading comprehension and had low reading achievement. It is in line with Naderi, Akrami, and Reza (2018), who state learners will experience difficulties in reading comprehension if they have lack of word recognition, lack of focus or concentration during reading, careless of their reading intonation, stress, and punctuation marks.

The current study found that students experienced difficulties in making inferences from passages. According to Misbah (2017), inference skills should be mastered by learners because it is a crucial key aspect of fluent reading. In this study, students have poor background knowledge so that they cannot comprehend messages which are not explicitly said in the passage. They are failed to create inference skills of reading. This finding was in line with Batic (2019) who found that learners who have poor background knowledge and lack of reading experiences will face difficulties in taking inferences in reading activities. It means that students are failed in connecting their previous learnt knowledge

to new information while doing reading activities. Besides, poor mastery of grammar, uneasy to understand long sentences of paragraphs, and low knowledge of reading strategies are main factors influencing learners' difficulties in making inferences from passages (Sari & Abdulrahman, 2019). This study can be stated that learners faced general language difficulties. Consequently, they cannot understand literal meaning of information alone.

Students in the present study showed that they had lack of reading strategies. Reading strategies play key role in comprehending texts accurately and effectively. According to Nation (2006), learners who have lack of reading strategies very often they fail in comprehending texts being read. Skimming and scanning strategies in reading activities often help students to catch detail information from passages. In this study, the data gained from interview activities with students and English teachers informed that students read word by word within a text. They assumed the visual information from the text help them to understand effectively the detail information. In fact, this study indicated because students relied heavily on their visual information, they were failed in comprehending a simple text. This strategy applied by students impeded their reading speed and hampered their reading comprehension of a full text.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate students' reading achievement and difficulties in reading comprehension at the secondary school level. The mean score of reading achievement in semester 1 from four classes was 73, and it was the same mean score in semester 2 which was 73. It showed that students need to improve their reading skills and reading strategies. It means students faced difficulties in comprehending English reading text. Dealing with reading difficulties, students faced problems not only relating to linguistic aspects but also reading strategies applied in reading activities. Students felt that they did not enjoy reading activities and reading exercises provided by teachers inside or outside the class.

They felt reading tasks are boring activities because they had lack of word recognition. The students' difficulties in reading comprehension are classified into four main points, namely difficulties in determining main idea, understanding vocabulary, making inference, and detailing information from texts being read. Each point has different actuation of difficulties. For instance, in determining main idea, students faced difficulties because they do not have reading habit and low motivation to read. In the case of vocabulary, students had low vocabulary acquisition because they did not accustom their selves to read academic discourses or texts. The lack of reading habit, motivation, vocabulary acquisition caused students difficulties in making inferences about the content of the text being read

RECOMMENDATION

The students' difficulties in reading comprehension have been reported by difficulties in determining main idea, understanding vocabulary, making inference, and detailing information from texts being read. The students do not have good reading habit and low motivation to read. In the case of vocabulary, students had low vocabulary acquisition because they did not accustom their selves to read academic discourses or texts. The lack of reading habit, motivation, vocabulary acquisition caused students difficulties in making inferences about the content of the text being read. Because of this, students must be treated with various reading strategies. For further studies, researchers must see the level of students' reading motivation and reading exercises in reading classes.

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