Reading Comprehension Difficulties Encountered By Senior High School EFL Students

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Abstract

This study aims at finding out reading comprehension difficulties faced by the EFL students and the factors of the difficulties faced by thirty second graders of senior high school Banda Aceh. This research used mix method and the data were collected through test and interview. This research focused on five aspects in reading comprehension namely main idea, detail information, inference, reference, and vocabulary. The data collected were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative approach was used to obtain the data about the frequency of students’ difficulties in reading comprehension, while the qualitative approach was used to find out the factors why students face the difficulties. Based on the result from the test, the researcher found that the major difficulty students face in reading comprehension text is vocabulary (27%), followed by main idea (23%), inference and reference (18%), and detail information (14%). Moreover, the result from the interview with five students who got the lowest scores in the test and an English teacher who teaches the class indicates that the factors why the students face the difficulties are the absence of extensive reading, inadequate vocabulary, type of text, type of questions, the absence of the use of reading strategy, and the uncertainty of students' reading levels. The findings suggest the English teacher measures the students' reading levels properly, clearly teach the reading strategy, and apply an interesting strategy in teaching reading to motivate the students to read in English more.

Keywords: Reading difficulties, Reading comprehension, Students’ difficulties, EFL students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading can be explained as a process in which information from the text and the knowledge possessed by the reader act together to produce meaning (Anderson et al., 1985). The process of reading is the interaction between the reader and the text. Many things are happening during the process of reading:
the reader is not only looking at the print, but also marking on the page, deciding what they really mean and how they relate to each other. While reading, the reader also think about what he is reading, what it is meant to, and how it relates to other things he has read before, to things he know, to what he expects to come next in the text (Alderson, 2000).

Comprehending a text, for instance, is a complicated process in which the text’s meaning is a combination of the explicit, literal meanings of the words and sentences, as well as the inferred meanings that can be uniquely generated by the reader (Green & Roth, 2013). Reading comprehension is the process of elaborating meaning of a text in order to reach understanding. It is the process of transferring ideas from the written text to the readers’ mind to have comprehension. This is true as Alderson (2000) clearly defines that reading comprehension is an activity of comprehending which involves one’s knowledge of words. Thus, it can be concluded that reading is a way of comprehending a text to get meaning through a process of transferring ideas.

In addition, Al Odwan (2012) also stated that reading comprehension is a process that requires how to decode through the development of an extensive repertoire of sight words, learning the meanings of vocabulary words encountered in the texts, and learning how to abstract meaning from text. It represents how well readers understand literal comprehension which concentrates on explicit meaning and inferential comprehension which concentrates on implicit meaning in the reading text.

EFL students in senior high schools are expected to be able to comprehend the meaning of some kinds of text such as recount, descriptive, and narrative in written and oral form as well as know the aspects of the texts such as grammatical features and generic structures (Kemendikbud, 2014). Beside that, the students are also expected to master five aspects in reading comprehension, namely (1) main idea, (2) detailed information, (3) vocabulary in context, (4) reference, and (5) inference (Roe, et al. 2005).

Unfortunately, the students still struggling with reading comprehension and cannot attain the curriculum expectation.

A preliminary study had been done by the researcher at senior high school 4 Banda Aceh. She asked the English teacher in the school related to students’ reading comprehension. She found that the students at the school were still struggling in comprehending English reading texts. According to the teacher, the average score of those students’ achievement in the test of reading was 56.5. Their achievement in reading comprehension test was still low and below the minimum passing score of English learning at school which is 75.

Studies focused on various aspects of reading, such as the relation between skills in comprehension and the ability to make inferences, and their relation to background knowledge have been conducted by Cain, et al., (2001). This study found that students commonly failed in inference-making because they are poor at selecting the relevant information in the text or they did not know how to integrate one piece of information to another piece in order to make inference. Here the students failed to recall information in the text because they could not comprehend the text which in turn was caused by their weaknesses in vocabulary.
Shehu (2015) also had done a research in reading comprehension problem encountered by foreign language students in Albania. The objective of her research is to find out the factors why students had problems in reading comprehension text. The result of her research showed that the factors of students’ difficulties in reading comprehension text were new words (20%), background knowledge (18%), type of text (15%), organization (13%), Lack of illustration (15%), tenses (10%), linking word (10%), and pronoun (5%).

In National Examination (UN) and University Entrance Examination (SPMBPTN), reading comprehension aspects have a great deal of questions to be tested. After analyzing types of questions in UN and SPMBPTN in the last three years, the researcher found that 62% of questions in UN are reading comprehension questions and 100% in SPMBPTN. The aspects of reading comprehension tested are main ideas, details stated, details unstated or inferences, vocabulary in context, and references. Thus, senior high school students should be able to master the reading comprehension aspects since they have to deal with them in UN and SPMBPTN. Related to those problems, some research questions were formulated for this research (1)What difficulties are faced by second graders at Senior High School 4 in reading comprehension? And (2)What factors do affect the difficulties students face in reading comprehension?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Reading Comprehension
Zare and Othman (2013, p. 187) defined reading as an active process in which readers shift between sources of information, elaborate meaning and strategies, monitor their comprehension, and use their social context to reflect their response. The process of reading is the interaction between the reader and the text. Many things are happening during the process of reading; the reader is not only looking at the print, but also marking on the page, deciding what they really mean and how they relate to each other. While reading, the reader also think about what he is reading, what it is meant to, and how it relates to other things he has read before, to things he know, to what he expects to come next in the text (Alderson, 2002, p.3).

2.2. The Factors of Students’ Difficulties in Reading Comprehension
When it comes to reading difficulties, there are many aspects that influence the impairment in comprehending the reading text (Fata & Mutia, 2017). The difficulties in reading comprehension occur for many reasons. Some factors why students face difficulties in reading comprehension text are vocabulary, working memory, absence of extensive reading, type of text (Shehu, 2015, p.3) and type of question (Zuhra, 2015, p. 6).

3. METHOD
The research method used in this study was a mixed methods design. This means that both quantitative and qualitative research methods are used in this study. A mixed method design is useful to capture the best of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The researchers may first survey a large number of individuals, and then follow up with a few of them to obtain their specific language and voices about the topics. It allows the researcher to gather the data
in the same time and integrate the data in order to better understand about the problem (Creswell, 2009). The quantitative approach is used to obtain data about the students’ difficulties in reading comprehension text, while the qualitative approach is used to find out the factors why students face the difficulties. Additionally, the location of the research was SMAN 4 Banda Aceh. By purposive sampling, class XI-IPS 2 was selected as the sample; it consisted of 30 students with 19 female and 11 male students. The teacher recommended the researcher to choose this class. Class XI-IPS 2 is chosen because out of three classes for the second grade IPS students, this class got the lowest score in reading comprehension.

The research instruments used in this study were test and interview guide. First, the test was given to the students to find out the difficulties and the most difficult aspects that cause problem for them in reading comprehension test. The test was reading comprehension test which consists of 20 questions divided into 5 types of reading comprehension aspects; identifying main idea, finding supporting or detailed information, making reference, making inference, and understanding vocabulary in context. The tests were in the form of multiple choice with four options (a, b, c, and d). The tests were taken from the Practice Test for the TOEFL Junior Standard Test (Educational Testing Service, 2012). Second, interview was done as the additional data. The interview was done with 5 students and one English teacher. The researcher chose 5 students who get low score in the test. The researcher asked several questions related to the students’ difficulties based on the result of reading comprehension test. The question was adapted from some theories about the students' difficulties in reading comprehension text (Bell, 2001; Benettaye, 2010; Harmon, 2002; Mokhtari & Niederhouse, 2013; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012; Shehu, 2015).

First, the students were given test to measure their ability in reading comprehension. The tests were reading comprehension test which consists of 20 questions. The questions were divided into 5 types of reading comprehension aspects; identifying main idea, finding supporting or detailed information, making reference, making inference, and understanding vocabulary in context. So, there were 4 questions for each type of reading comprehension questions. The students were given 45 minutes to do the reading comprehension test.

Second, the researcher conducted an interview as the additional data. The interview was done with 5 students who get low score in the test and one English teacher. The researcher asked several questions related to the students’ difficulties based on the result of reading comprehension test. The question was adapted from some theories about the students' difficulties in reading comprehension text (Bell, 2001; Benettaye, 2010; Harmon, 2002; Mokhtari & Niederhouse, 2013; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012; Shehu, 2015).

The data collected from reading comprehension test was analyzed quantitatively. First, the researcher did the scoring of the reading comprehension test using the formula proposed by Arikunto (2006). Then, The results of the test were classified into five categories based on criterion-reference evaluation of Arikunto (2006), namely excellent, very good, good, enough, and bad.

Furthermore, the researcher calculated the average score (mean) of the students’ scores. Arikunto (2006) describes the formula of mean. After obtaining the mean score, the next step was analyzing the items. The researcher used the formula as suggested by Sudijono (2006). Afterwards, the data from
the students and teachers responses by means of interview were transcribed from Bahasa to English and described in narration form. The researcher used audiotape in the interview to record respondents’ answers. Besides, the researcher also used notes as additional tool to record respondents’ answer.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. below shows the classification of students’ scores result in reading comprehension test. The researcher determines the level of students’ scores based on criterion-reference evaluation suggested by Arikunto (2006).

Table 1. The Criterion-Reference Evaluation of Students’ Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Research Result</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>95 – 100</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85 – 94</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 – 84</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 – 74</td>
<td>Enough</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.3 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 – 64</td>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 – 54</td>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. shows that the students’ score in reading comprehension test, in which the highest score lies in 75-84 (achieved by 4 students) and the lowest score lies in 0-54 (achieved by 15 students). Moreover, the table shows that 50% of the students failed in the reading comprehension test. This indicates that the students’ reading comprehension were still low.

Furthermore, Figure 1. illustrates the percentage of students’ difficulties in five aspects of reading comprehension.

Figure 1. Percentage of Students’ Difficulties in Reading Comprehension

By any large, the result indicates that all students seem to have problems in all aspects of reading comprehension text. The students’ biggest problems in reading comprehension is understanding vocabulary in context which was counted 27 % (78 in frequencies). The second was followed by identifying main idea 23% (69 in frequencies), the third was making inference and reference 18% (53 in frequencies), and last was finding detail information 14% (41 in frequencies).
Besides analyzing the students’ difficulties in 5 aspects of reading comprehension text, the researcher also analyzed the factors why students faced difficulties in comprehending a reading text. The factors to the students’ difficulties in reading comprehension text are:

First, the absence of extensive reading. Based on the interview, the researcher found that the students rarely read a text in English. This is due to the weakness of students’ motivation and awareness to practice their reading comprehension aside from the classroom activity. According to the teacher, the students were not interested in reading English and they have low motivation to read. Benetrayeb (2010) stated that extensive reading is good for the students to actively involve with English aside from activities in the classroom. It can help recognizing and solving the reading comprehension difficulties related to vocabulary knowledge.

Second, the students were poor in vocabulary mastery. They have minim vocabulary which make them difficult to understand a text in English. The teacher said that there are a lot of words in English that they do not understand yet, even though they have been in senior high school level. Harmon (2002) agreed that students faced difficulties in reading comprehension due to the limited vocabulary. Mastering vocabulary is proved increasing students’ ability in comprehending a text. It is necessary for them to properly comprehend the words or vocabulary in order to be able to decode the message. The relationship of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension is well established, in which vocabulary is a predictor of students’ reading comprehension.

Moreover, type of the text is another factor. The students could not explain when they were asked about what a recount text is. Based on the interview with the students, the researcher found that the students had little knowledge about the text genre, in this case a recount text. They tried to explain, yet their answer were incorrect. Infact, they had studied recount text in the first grade. But, they could not recall what it is about. While, the teacher was not aware of the students’ problem with type of text. She did not explain anything about it in the interview. According to Schoenbach, Greenleaf, and Murphy (2012), there is a relation between type of text with the successful in reading comprehension. Students will find it difficult to process and understanding the text due to their unfamiliarity of the language features and structures of the text.

Furthermore, the students could not recognize the type of the question in reading test. Zuhra (2015) supported that the difficulties that students face in reading comprehension is mostly related to their inability of recognizing the type of questions being asked in the test. The students could not differentiate the nature of different types of reading comprehension questions resulted in their weaknesses in answering the reading comprehension questions. On the other hand, the teacher did not mention anything about students’ problem in recognizing the different type of reading comprehension questions.

In addition, the factor why students faced difficulties in reading comprehension text are that the students did not use any strategy when reading a text and they were still confused about their level in English (Zahra et al, 2016). In the interview, the students stated that they did not use any strategy in reading, even though the teacher had taught them about that before. The teacher, on the other hand, did not explain giving reading strategy to solve the students’ problem in reading. She prioritized finding the best teaching strategy.
to solve the problem. Infact, using strategy during reading can improve reading comprehension. Strategy instruction is particularly necessary and effective for those students who are struggling most in reading comprehension (McNamara, et. al., 2007).

Moreover, the students had different opinion about their level in reading with the teacher’s opinion. The students told that their levels in reading lie in 1-2, while the teacher argued their levels lie in 3. It can be concluded that the teacher and students had different opinion about the students’ level in reading. Infact, the teacher should know better about the students’ levels, so that she could improve the students’ reading skill appropriately based on their level. According to McNamara (2009), the awareness of their level in reading comprehension text is important for the students which can lead them to use appropriate strategy while reading the text. Therefore, the students should understand their level of reading well to solve their problems in reading comprehension text.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The study has found that the students of second grade at Senior High School 4 faced difficulties in reading comprehension deal with identifying main idea, finding detail information, making inference, making reference, and understanding vocabulary in context. Among those aspects, understanding vocabulary in context (27%) became the major difficulty and finding detailed information (14%) the least difficulty which students encountered in reading comprehension.

There are many factors which become the reasons why the students face the difficulties in reading comprehension text. Among the factors, the most common ones are the absence of extensive reading, poor vocabulary, type of text, type of question, the absence of reading strategy used, and the uncertainty of students’ reading levels.

Based on the result finding about students’ difficulties in reading comprehension text, the researcher suggests the following advices for the english teacher. The teacher should measure the students’ reading levels to know better the students’ levels, in order to properly improve their reading skill. The teacher should clearly teach about the reading strategy and the purpose of reading to the students. The teacher should apply an interesting strategy in teaching reading to motivate the students to love reading in English.

In this study, for instance, the researcher focused on the students’ difficulties in reading comprehension text deals with main idea, detail information, inference, reference, and vocabulary. Besides, the researcher also analyzed factors why the students face the difficulties in comprehending the text. Thus, the researcher suggests the other researchers to conduct a study focused on other aspects in reading comprehension.

REFERENCES


