

THE READING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS FACED BY ENGLISH DEPARTMENT STUDENTS OF SYIAH KUALA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is the process of understanding the meaning of written language by reconstructing the author's message using one's experiential knowledge, knowledge of language, and thinking skills. The students' reading comprehension problems can be solved by mastering reading comprehension skills. The objectives of this study are to find out in which reading comprehension skills the English Department students have difficulties and what factors affecting them. The method used in this study was a descriptive qualitative method. The sample of this research was 30 English Department students of Syiah Kuala University who have passed Reading Comprehension IV at least with a C grade. The data was collected by using a test and an interview. The questions on the test were designed based on 13 reading comprehension skills. The research results show that English Department students have difficulties in mastering reading comprehension skills. The major difficulties faced by them are difficulty in answering transition questions (80.75%), implied detail questions (61.20%), unstated detail questions (61%), and vocabulary questions (56%). In addition, the students' lack of reading comprehension skill were affected by some factors including the background knowledge, the difficulty of material, the purpose of reading, concentration, motivation, and reading interest. Based on the research results, the writer recommends that the students do more reading comprehension practice by implementing some reading comprehension skills and extensively read a lot of English reading materials.

Key words: *Reading comprehension, problems, English Department students*

INTRODUCTION

Reading as one of the four language skills is becoming increasingly important for most students of every field of study. Reading skill is particularly important to be mastered by students who learn English at any universities. One of the general reasons why students may read is to get important information for them (Cohen, 1990:80). The students need to read several books just to

summarize or to get certain ideas or information of the books. They also have to read essays, websites on the internet, magazine articles, or newspapers to write some research papers. It may take a long time to finish reading or to understand the content of those written language for many students.

Reading has become one of the primary curricular concerns in the second and foreign language programs

(Murcia, 1991:195). It is often the chief goal of learners in universities where English is taught as a foreign language. While reading, the students are not expected to read fast but they should understand and get the information from the book immediately. To read is to understand what the writer tries to present in his/her writing. To understand means to comprehend.

Comprehension requires the application of rapid word recognition which will enable the readers to think about what they are reading. According to Smith (1967:185) reading without comprehension is not reading. He assumes that reading is the ability to recognize, to pronounce, and to understand the printed symbols on the page. It is a tool of communication between the writer and reader. Basically, the students should be aware of what they are reading and what kind of techniques they should use to get better comprehension. Therefore, for students who feel uncomfortable with reading English, they should know how to read efficiently and use some reading techniques to improve their reading comprehension.

At the English Department of Syiah Kuala University, English students learn how to read efficiently and some reading skills or techniques to improve their reading comprehension. Some lecturers, particularly on reading courses also often encourage English students to

read any kinds of English reading materials such as, English newspapers, magazine articles, fiction books, and non-fiction books (biography, history, etc.) for improving their reading comprehension. It is believed that reading is a great tool towards helping the students to learn English.

English students of Syiah Kuala University can find English reading materials easily at the campus. English reading materials are available at the Syiah Kuala University library and the Language Centre. However, they still feel reluctant to read although they have known the advantages of reading English materials in learning English. According to them, reading English materials is difficult and only waste time to read it. Moreover, if they have to comprehend the text that does not relate to their prior knowledge, they will have great difficulties in reading and understanding the text.

Ironically, although English students have learnt about reading skills as mentioned above from Reading Comprehension I until Reading Comprehension IV, they still find obstacles in reading comprehension. When the writer works part time as a proctor of TOEFL test in the Language Centre, the writer finds that some English students have difficulties in reaching the high score of Reading Comprehension section.

This is a surprising fact for English students who have learnt English reading skills for two years in

the English Department. English students are considered as the students who have higher intermediate of English proficiency but they fail to reach the demanded score.

In accordance with the ideas explained above, the writer is encouraged to do an exploration dealing with the problem: (1) what reading comprehension obstacles faced by the English Department students of Syiah Kuala University?

The aim of conducting this study is to provide a contribution into the field of reading course teaching through an analysis of the reading comprehension difficulties encountered by the students, which then to be an input for lecturers and tutors of reading courses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading Comprehension

The simplest definition of reading comprehension is understanding what the reader reads. A student's success in reading is evaluated by the ability and extent of understanding the content that is being read.

The basic components of comprehension include skills, abilities, attitudes, and background knowledge. Comprehension in reading is the ability to grasp the writer's intended meaning. In order to reconstruct this meaning, readers must use their previous knowledge of language and their background experience. However, grasping the writer's meaning is not only one aspect of reading comprehension. Readers must

also be able to retell, to evaluate, and to respond to the writer's ideas. Thus, reading comprehension is defined as making sense of written language.

According to Gillet and Temple (1994:40), there are three elements of reading for comprehension. First, the readers need knowledge of the world to understand new things. Second, they need to be familiar with the variety of text structures we're likely to encounter. Last, the readers need to seek meaning, and not wait passively for it to rise up from the page.

Reading Comprehension Skills

According to Phillips (2001), there are 13 reading skills that the test takers should implement to find the correct answer in the reading comprehension test: (1) answer main idea questions correctly (2) recognize the organization of ideas (3) answer stated detail questions correctly (4) find "unstated" details (5) find pronoun referents (6) answer implied detail questions correctly (7) answer transition questions correctly (8) find definitions from structural clues (9) determine meaning from word parts (10) use context to determine meanings of difficult words (11) use context to determine meanings of simple words (12) determine where specific information is found and (13) determine the tone, purpose, or course.

Meanwhile, Anderson et al. (1991) and Barnett (1989), quoted by Aebersold and Field (1997) say that there are some reading strategies, or

they are sometimes called reading skills that the successful readers do to comprehend the text well, such as in the followings: recognize words quickly; identify the grammatical function of words; read for meaning, concentrate on constructing meaning; guess about the meaning of the text; keep the purpose for reading the text in mind; adjust strategies to the purpose for reading; identify or infer main ideas; understanding the relationships between the parts of a text; use context to build meaning and aid comprehension; continue reading even when unsuccessful, at least for a while.

Further, according to Sharpe (2004), there are some reading comprehension skills that should be acquired, including: (1) previewing; (2) reading for main ideas; (3) using contexts for vocabulary; (4) scanning for details; (5) making inferences; (6) identifying exceptions; (7) locating references; (8) referring to the passage; (9) reading faster.

Factors Affecting Reading Comprehension

In reading comprehension process, the students or the readers find some obstacles besides reading comprehension skills. These obstacles are caused by many factors such as background knowledge and experience, the difficulty of material, the purposes of reading, the reader's concentration, motivation and reading habits (Carrel, 1984; Hirsch, 1987; Mc Whorter, 1989).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Subjects

This research is a descriptive study. The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative. According to Arikunto (2003:309), "Descriptive qualitative does not mean to test certain hypothesis but only to describe the fact about variable, situation, and symptom". The description used in this research was to describe the students' obstacles in reading comprehension where the percentage measurement was employed to illustrate the description. In collecting the data, thirty (30) persons of the third year students of English Department of the FKIP Syiah Kuala University who have passed Reading Comprehension IV at least with a C were used as the subject of research.

Instruments and Data Analysis

The main instrument used in this research was the reading comprehension test. It was a diagnostic pre-test copied from the Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL Test (Phillips, 2001:343-349). The test itself consists of five passages followed by a number of questions. The total number of questions in the test is 50. The questions on the test were designed based on 13 reading comprehension skills.

In addition to the test, the writer also interviewed the students in order to get some further information about their experiences when they were dealing with the test and the

factors affecting their reading comprehension. There were 10 questions that the students should answer in an interview. The questions mainly deal with the difficulties faced by students in reading comprehension and the factors affecting their reading comprehension.

After the test and the interview have been conducted, the data obtained were analyzed by using the measurement of percentage and described in the form of written words. The results of reading comprehension test describe the difficulties faced by English Department students in reading comprehension which are related to reading comprehension skills.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The student difficulties in reading comprehension skills

In general, the data analysis shows that skill V (skill in finding pronoun referents) is the easiest reading comprehension skill for the students. With the difficulty percentage of 0%, it indicates that the students succeed to master skill in finding pronoun referents. In contrast, the students had the difficulty percentage of 80.75% for skill in answering transition questions. It indicates that skill VII is the most difficult one and the students fail to recognize the transition questions.

Meanwhile, it was obtained that most of the students had difficulty in vocabulary problems. They found

difficulty in skills VIII, IX, X, and XI which are related to vocabulary problems. The difficulty percentage of each skill is above 50% which is considered as difficult skills for the students. Based on the results of interview, 43% of students said that the most difficult reading comprehension skill was skill in answering vocabulary questions.

Further, the test items no. 2, 15, 17, 38, 42, and 48 are the questions about vocabulary needing skill IX, X, and XI. The students failed answer these questions because they did not know the meaning of the words in the questions and they did not use the context clues in the passages to figure out the meaning of the difficult words in the questions. The students who the writer interviewed admitted that they preferred looking up dictionary to using this skill when they found unknown words.

The test items no. 14 and 44 are the implied detail questions. Almost all implied detail questions seemed to be difficult for students. 23 out of 30 students who the writer interviewed admitted that they found difficulty in skill VI (skill in answering implied detail questions) because they did not have adequate vocabulary. They had difficulty to imply the passages because they did not understand the passages because of a lack of vocabulary.

Meanwhile, the test items number 22 and 36 are the questions

which need skill III (skill in answering stated detail questions) to answer those items. Besides, the test item number 28 is the question of skill IV (skill in finding unstated detail questions). The students who the writer interviewed said that they had difficulty in answering those questions because they did not have background knowledge about the passage and its vocabulary was difficult in general. 20% of students said that skill IV was the most difficult one in reading comprehension test.

The test item no. 9 and 10 are the questions about transitions. To answer these questions the students need to understand skill VII (skill in answering transition questions). Based on the result of reading comprehension test, this skill is the most difficult skill in reading comprehension test. The test item no. 10 is considered as the most difficult question. Most of the students admitted that they did not know the meaning of transition '*preceding*' so that only 2 students could answer it. So, it can be concluded that they failed to answer this item test because they had difficulty in mastering transition signal and vocabulary.

The Factors Affecting Reading Comprehension

Based on the interview, almost all students stated that some reading passages on the reading comprehension test were difficult to them because they did not have the amount of background knowledge. 23

out of 30 students admitted that the amount of background knowledge they have affected them in comprehending some reading passages on the test. They said that the reading passages for the questions no. 31-40 is the most difficult one for them because they did not have background knowledge on that passage so that they could not fully comprehend it.

In addition to the background knowledge factor, the difficulty of material also influenced them in reading comprehension. Based on the result of interview, 20 students said that the reading comprehension test was difficult for them. They had difficulty in this test because they were not familiar with the TOEFL test and its vocabulary was difficult for them. 12 students said that they never took the TOEFL test and rarely did the TOEFL practice so that they had difficulty in answering the questions of this test. This is a surprising fact for English Department students who have learnt English for three years but they never took the TOEFL test and still felt reluctant to do the TOEFL practice.

Meanwhile, all students stated that their purpose for reading also affected their reading comprehension. They admitted that they could read and understand the text more quickly in the test than reading for enjoyment because they had purpose of answering questions in the reading test. Consequently, they were able to decide what facts and ideas they are

looking for on the text to answer the question on the test. However, most of the students said that they needed to read the difficult passages time after time when they answered some test items for skill IV and VI (see Attachment 3).

On the contrary, on the test that the writer held, most of the students did not find difficulty in concentration because there were not factors that interfered their concentration at that time. Only two students that found difficulty in concentrating in the reading test because of their physical state. In addition to concentration, the reading interest also affected the students' reading comprehension. Based on the result of the interview, there were only 10 students who often read English reading materials. Each of them has own preference of English reading materials to read such as English newspaper and fiction books. In the test, they could get more correct answers than the students who did not like reading. They could achieve about 27 to 37 correct answers. It indicates that their reading interest affected their reading comprehension.

The last factor that affected the students' reading comprehension was motivation. All students the writer interviewed admitted that they did not have enough motivation to develop their reading interest. Therefore, they have difficulty in arousing their internal motivation to do extensive reading for improving their reading

comprehension. Meanwhile, all students said that they had good reading interest when they learnt Reading Comprehension II subject. The lecturer of that subject gave good motivation to them to improve their reading ability. Consequently, they were encouraged to improve their reading ability and to do extensive reading.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research is to find out the obstacles faced by English Department Students in reading comprehension. The students have difficulties in mastering reading comprehension skills. The major difficulties faced by them are difficulty in answering transition questions with a percentage of 80.75%, implied detail questions (61.20%), unstated detail questions (61%), and vocabulary questions (56%); however, they succeeded in answering pronoun referent questions with the difficulty percentage of 0%.

In addition, the students' reading comprehension was also affected by some factors, including motivation as the most affected factor, background knowledge, the difficulty of material, the purpose of reading, the readers' concentration and reading interest.

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