READING DIFFICULTIES: COMPARISON ON STUDENTS'AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTION

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Abstract

There have been plenty studies conducted in order to find and develop the best techniques and strategies to help improving students' reading comprehension. Those teaching techniques and strategies were mostly developed based on teachers' work on existing the theories and framework. However, amid the development and practices of these techniques and strategies, students' perceptions towards the teaching and learning process get less attention. Therefore, this study tries to bring the light into students' perceptions. This study aimed to examine and compare students' and teachers' perception regarding students' reading difficulties. Through random sampling, 80 students of English Department at the University of Bengkulu were chosen to fill a questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed based on reading macro and micro skills to investigate students' reading difficulties. The similar questionnaire was also given to 4 lecturers who teach reading courses in the department. Some students and teachers were also interviewed to clarify some information or to get more elaboration about some interesting points. The results of the study showed that students and teachers' agree in some points and showed different perceptions in some points. The finding of this study will be a good reflection for the teachers as well as for the students on their reading activities in the classroom. Furthermore, it is helpful for the teachers in their efforts to develop better program for reading classes to improve students' reading comprehension.

Keywords: r*eading difficulties, comprehension, students' perception*

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is important for one's language learning development and for their learning life in general. Reading plays an important role in the process of language learning: using textbooks for language courses, writing, revising, developing vocabulary, acquiring grammar, editing, and using computer-assisted language learning programs (Mikulecky, 2008). Therefore, reading instruction is essential in second language learning curriculum.

However, efficient reading is considered to be a difficult skill to master due to its complex process. Reading is a complex, interactive mental activities of constructing meaning from written text. In reading, readers do not only rely on the features of the text they are facing but it also involves the features of readers and tasks (Singhal, 1998 in Ebrahimi, 2012). As the consequence, reading instruction must be tailored in such a way that can help students get through the reading process effectively.

Abundant of studies have been conducted to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of instructional programs and practice in teaching reading. Most of those studies center their attention on recommended strategies and techniques that can facilitate reading comprehension. Those studies have been developed on the basis of theoretical and empirical experiences of the experts and the teachers. Many studies also have been conducted to find out the effectiveness of those strategies and techniques in helping

students to read efficiently. However, there are very few studies that take into account on students' own perceptions on their difficulties during reading. In fact, many students confess that they always find that it is hard to complete reading comprehension section in an English proficiency test. They also find difficulties when teachers give them task to read texts and process the information from texts by themselves through an intellectual engagement, analysis and interpretation of the text.

It has been observed that students, especially ESL and EFL learners, confront a variety of difficulties while reading. . Oakhill (1993) identified three main theoretical approaches to reading comprehension problem. The first argues that comprehension problems arise because of difficulties at the single- word level. The second posits that poor comprehenders have difficulty in the syntactic and semantic analysis of text. The third is that poor comprehenders have difficulties with higher order comprehension skills: making inferences from text, integrating ideas in it, and monitoring their own comprehension. Later on, Rahman (2007) found reading difficulties comprise inadequate vocabulary, lexical inefficiency, structural complexity, language inaccessibility, poor reading skills, lack of schemata, and students' lack of interest.

Sanford (2015) argues that one of the most important factors that impede students' reading comprehension is phonemic awareness, the ability to process the individual sounds of letters, which is needed for word recognition. Poor working memory is another factor that affects a student's ability to read proficiently and comprehend text. Additionally, vocabulary knowledge positively affects reading comprehension and academic performance. Another factor linked to reading difficulties is low prior knowledge (i.e., poor general knowledge) and lack of breadth in vocabulary. The other factor that may influence students' reading process is motivation.

Unfortunately, the research on students' reading difficulties, particularly in Indonesian students' context does not get enough attention. Most of the studies on reading are carried out to find the effectiveness of certain techniques or strategies in facilitating students' reading ability. However, the effectiveness of those techniques and strategies are questioned if the most of the students are struggling readers who have many difficulties during reading. It is also important to find out if teachers' (as designer of classroom activities) perspective on students' reading needs and difficulties correspond to students' perspective of their difficulties.

Therefore, this research aims to find out students' difficulties in reading and to what extent do teacher and learner perceptions correspond with respect to the sources of reading difficulties experienced by Indonesian EFL learners.

Literature Review

Reading is a complex process of reconstructing the author's ideas in order to gain meaning from the print. So, reading is an active process that goes beyond recognizing words in a text. It involves knowledge of language, the processing of messages the text carries, guessing power of the reader to a certain extent, perception, psychomotor movements and emotional response (Rahman, 2007). Grabe explains that reading comprehension involves abilities to recognize words rapidly and efficiently, develop and use a very large recognition vocabulary, process sentences in order to build comprehension, engage a range of strategic processes and underlying cognitive skills (e.g., setting goals, changing goals flexibly, monitoring comprehension), interpret meaning in relation to background knowledge, interpret and evaluate texts in line with reader goals and purposes, and process texts fluently over an extended period of time.

Furthermore, researchers highlighted the occurrence of interaction among the reader, the text and the context in reading process (Rumelhart, 1977; Stanovich, 1980). It is believed that comprehension in reading occurs when the elements mentioned above and

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the sociocultural context in which the reading act occurred are interwoven well. It may mean that a reader should take an active part in the process by interacting with a text and also reacting and responding to it in a multifarious way.

During an active interaction with the text, readers use reading skills to make sense of a text. Alyousef (2006) proposes at least six general component skills and knowledge areas involved in reading, they are automatic recognition skills, vocabulary and structural knowledge, formal discourse structure knowledge, content/world background knowledge, synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies, and metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring. In more details, Brown (2007) lists fourteen reading skills which are categorized into reading macroskills and microckills. The list starts with essentially recognizing the alphabet, and automatically understanding how it combines into words. As he moves down the list, the skills build upon each other, becoming increasingly based on understanding larger meaning.

To gain more understanding about what readers actually do during reading, some researchers suggest some components or factors that are involved in reading process. Grabe (1991) suggests six factors that are interacting with one another during reading; automatic recognition skills, vocabulary and structural knowledge, formal discourse structure knowledge, content/world background knowledge, synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies and metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring. Later on, believing that successful comprehension emerges from integrative interaction of textual information and readers' preexisting knowledge, Koda (2005) identifies seven key components of reading comprehension; decoding, vocabulary knowledge, syntactic processing, text-structure knowledge, main idea detection, background knowledge and comprehension strategies.

In sort, research on reading agree that reading is a process that starts with decoding the printed and ends with constructing meaning through an active interaction between the writer and the reader.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research, 80 students of English Department Program at the University Bengkulu were randomly chosen to fill a questionnaire on students' reading difficulties. (n=67) were female, ranging in age from 19 to 22. They had similar educational backgrounds and had received at least six years of formal English instruction in primary and secondary school. In addition, 4 teachers took part in the survey. The four teachers are teaching reading course.

One questionnaire, with both student and teacher versions, was designed to find out participants' perceptions on reading difficulties. The questionnaire consisted of 35 items on 5-point Likert scale (1= "never" and 5="always). The questionnaire was developed based on the results of comprehensive review of reading comprehension literature, particularly on skills, components and factors involved in reading activity.

After finishing filling the questionnaire, 10 students and 3 teachers were also interviewed in an informal interview session to clarify their responds and to find out other reading difficulties reported by the students.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 80 questionnaires administered for the students, 78 were returned to the researcher. For the teacher's questionnaire, all teachers returned the questionnaire to the researcher. Descriptive statistics was performed to analyze the questionnaire data using SPSS 20.

First, the student questionnaires (n=78) and teacher questionnaires (n=4) were f all analyzed for reliability. The reliability estimate Cronbach's alpha was .88 for the student version and .78 for the teacher version, suggesting satisfactory internal consistency. After that, the results of the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively by using descriptive statistics. The following tables show the 10 items that get the highest mean, which indicate the areas students find most difficult, based on students' questionnaire and teachers' questionnaire.

Table 1. Results of Students' Questionnaire

Questionnaire Item	Mean
Q3. The reading passage is difficult because there are many new words.	3.78
Q10. The reading materials are difficult to understand because of words having different syntactical functions and varieties of 'inflectional endings	3.64
Q27. I often get nervous when reading English texts.	3.47
Q7. The reading materials are difficult to understand because of many idioms and figurative meanings.	3.23
Q20. I feel it is difficult for me to find out the detail information of the reading passage.	3.23
Q17. I have difficulty understanding the materials because of poor strategy use.	3.17
Q34. Reading passages are difficult because I have to make inferences from unstated statement	3.13
Q2. The reading passage is difficult when the sentences are long.	3.12
Q35. Reading passages are difficult because I cannot predict what would come next	3.03
Q1. The reading passage is difficult when the sentences have complex structure.	3.01

Table 2. Results of Teachers' Questionnaire

Questionnaire Item	Mean
Q7. The reading materials are difficult to understand because of many idioms and figurative meanings	4.50
Q3. The reading passage is difficult because there are many new words.	4.25
Q1. The reading passage is difficult when the sentences have complex structure.	4.00
Q4. The reading materials are difficult because they don't have enough background knowledge.	4.00
Q10. The reading materials are difficult to understand because of words having different syntactical functions and varieties of 'inflectional endings	4.00
Q17. Students have difficulty understanding the materials because of poor strategy use.	4.00
Q9. the reading passage is difficult when the author's and students' cultures are different	3.50
Q23. Students often get frustrated when reading English texts.	3.50
Q27. I often get nervous when reading English texts.	3.50
Q35. Reading passages are difficult because they cannot predict what would come next	3.50

The data shows that lack of vocabulary is considered to be the most significant sources of students' difficulties (Q7). This finding is not surprising. Some researchers also have revealed that lack of vocabulary knowledge is students' biggest problem in reading

(Rahman, 2007; Chung, 2014). Many students still depend on dictionary when they find new words or difficult words in the text. It makes them unable to understand the meaning of the words contextually which make them difficult to understand the text thoroughly.

Most of the students also find difficulties in reading related to syntactic analysis (Q10, Q2, and Q1) and semantic analysis (Q7). Students' insufficient understanding of the relationship and functions of words within sentences often cause reading problems. Long sentences, moreover, make the students confused and hard to create meaning from the text. Furthermore, since the students' language knowledge is still poor, they cannot differentiate the connotative and denotative meanings of words or text. Therefore, many idioms and figurative meanings in text can be barrier for them to understand the text. The inferring lexical meanings (Q34) also becomes one of students' main problems. The students find it difficult to understand the meaning of the text beyond the printed information.

Strategy related problems are also found to make reading difficult for students (Q20, Q17 and Q35). From the interview with some students, they admitted they rarely use reading strategies that they have learned. They just read the text from the beginning until the end without any conscious strategies used. The data also reveals that the students still feel nervous when they read English text (Q27) and it makes them difficult to read effectively.

Comparing students' and teachers' responds on students' reading difficulties, it was found that most of the reading components that the students consider to constitute their reading difficulties were also the components that the teachers' observe to be problems on students' reading difficulty (Q3, Q10, Q27, Q7, Q17, Q35, and Q1). Although the teachers think that the students have reading difficulties related to their background knowledge and sociocultural factors, students do not find them as their main problems.

Even though there is no significant discrepancy between students' and teachers' perception on students' reading difficulties, some improvements are still necessary. Regarding the classroom activities, it is suggested that the teachers train the students to be less dependent on dictionary and to give more activities to add their vocabulary. Classroom activities should also be designed to make the students use higher order skills more often, such as predicting, using contextual clues, guessing word meaning, interpreting texts, evaluating a text critically. Teachers also need to emphasize the use of reading strategies during reading activities. Also, teachers must motivate the students to read and create less stressful atmosphere by providing interesting reading materials.

4. CONCLUSION

Reading as a complex process needs the students to engage actively during reading involving many components. As struggling readers, there are some factors that make reading to be difficult for students. Those factors are vocabulary knowledge, syntactic and semantic analysis of text, making inferential meaning, strategy use and students' feeling during reading. The results of the study also shows that there is no significant difference on students' and teachers' perception on students' reading difficulties.

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