EFL STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS: LINGUISTIC AND NON-LINGUISTIC COMPLEXITIES

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to investigate how to overcome reading comprehension problems amongst students in an EFL classroom. Specifically, this study tries to identify both linguistic and non-linguistic reading comprehension problems. Further, the study focused on fifty of the fifth semester students from the English department in the Teaching Faculty at Syiah Kuala University. Data collection was conducted by distributing the *English Reading Comprehension Problems Questionnaire* modified from Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2015). The data was analyzed by using quantitative analysis to get the mean scores and percentages. The results indicated that the students experienced the most reading problems in the areas of linguistics (69%). In addition, based on mean scores and percentages from the questionnaire, the results shown that the biggest reading comprehension problem was with semantics in which 81% of the participants considered unfamiliar vocabulary was their major problem in comprehending English texts.

Keywords: *Reading Comprehension, Reading Comprehension Problems, EFL Students.*

INTRODUCTION

As printed language has been growing significantly in recent decades, reading has become more and more essential in modern life. We immerse ourselves into reading activities throughout the day in

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many ways. We read newspapers, magazines, advertisements and maps plus messages on our hp, tablet and/or laptop. We read those written items because they contain information that we need in our daily life.

In other situations, we frequently read for enjoyment. We select our own favorite reading materials such as a fictional book and read it independently. This kind of reading activity is generally called extensive reading. The material used for extensive reading activities is basically easy to read, attractive, and pleasure oriented (Bamford & Day, 2004). This type of reading gives readers unique experiences. In addition, Miller (2009) says that in this way, extensive reading may enrich the reader's life, reveal unknown and forgotten worlds and bring the reader into another dimension of life. Thus, many people are very interested and excited to expand our extensive reading activities.

In more formal settings such as in the work environment, workers and officers are also required to engage in reading activities. Mostly, they need to read, interpret, and use information from work related texts to achieve their goals in the workplace. Therefore, the ability to read various kinds of texts is crucial nowadays.

Next, in the educational domain, reading is one of the most common and often compulsory activities that students and academicians have to do all the time, all around the world. They are required to read many kinds of texts for various types of purposes dealing with their assignments and other academic demands. Yukselir (2014) considers that reading is one of the most beneficial, fundamental, and central skills for students to master in order to learn new information, to gain access to alternative explanations and interpretations and to start the synthesis of critical evaluation skills. Hung and Ngan (2015) have also said that reading is a basic skill that can improve students' vocabulary, fluency, speaking and writing, and finally can help them to master their target language. Therefore, it is a no-brainer to state that having good reading skills is essential for successful students.

Broadly speaking, one of the most frequent topics in the EFL reading classroom today is the issue of reading comprehension. Stauffer (1969) has mentioned the necessity to comprehend texts by stating that reading means comprehending. In this sense, few would deny that the ability to comprehend English texts is probably one of the aspects which are most required by EFL students. However, in reality, many EFL students are still struggling to overcome their reading comprehension problems. Davoudi and Yousefi (2015) have listed a

number of EFL learners' reading difficulties and problems such as deficits in vocabulary knowledge and background knowledge, problems with grammatical knowledge and also poor reading strategies which is in fact very important to reduce the difficulties (Samad, Jannah & Fitriani, 2017).

Furthermore, reading texts in a foreign language is different from reading in a first language. Probably, EFL readers have often had much experience reading in their first language. While, when reading any English material, we need to consider a number of language proficiency elements. Specifically, when reading material in a foreign language, the reader will perhaps encounter different linguistic elements from their first language. Those differences across two languages probably range from the lexical to the syntactical elements. In addition, there are also some non-linguistic factors which make reading in the foreign language harder than reading in a first language. Socio-cultural backgrounds for instance, in reading first language material, generally, most of the time, students will not encounter any difficulties in comprehending the socio-cultural context of the material. While in almost all cases of reading foreign language material, EFL students will frequently encounter socio-cultural complexities. This happens because each of the languages has it's own social and culture features. Therefore, most of the time, reading foreign language material is considered more difficult than reading first language material.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading Comprehension

In the literature, reading comprehension has been defined in a number of different ways by various experts. Sweet and Snow (2003) define reading as a process of constructing meaning from text. While Grabe and Stoller (2002) point out that reading is drawing and interpreting meaning from the printed page to become solid information. Further, Yukselir (2014, p. 66) specifically mentions that "reading comprehension is the result of complex interactions between text, setting, the reader, the reader's background, her reading strategies, her L1 and the L2, and the reader's decision making." On the other hand, Alyousef (2006, p. 64) has argued that "reading can be seen as an interactive process between a reader and a text which leads to automaticity or reading fluency." Therefore, reading is commonly called a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' in which a reader makes

guesses and matches any experience with the information given in the reading task (Goodman, 1967).

Reading comprehension is also simply known as a kind of thinking process which requires the reader to make inferences from the text. Without using her thinking processes, the reader may not attain any or all the information and may not wholly understand the text (Fitriani, 2015). In this sense, it is obvious that reading comprehension involves a process of extracting information from the text and constructing comprehension through the interaction between the text and the reader's background knowledge. To obtain excellent comprehension of the text, the reader needs to develop and reflect some of the ideas in the text.

Reading Comprehension Problems

Reading comprehension problems have been a popular issue in EFL teaching-learning settings for a long time. Numerous studies have shown that most EFL students often have difficulties in comprehending English texts. Vogel (1998) as cited in Chen and Chen (2015) has said that about 52% of adults with L2 reading comprehension problems had difficulties in learning a foreign language. In this sense, there are a number of reading problems which may be encountered by EFL students. First, they are probably not keen on reading L2 literature because they have to work hard to comprehend it. Second, studies mention several common problems in the EFL reading classroom such as insufficient vocabulary, problems understanding linguistic complexity including lexical and syntactic knowledge, language inaccessibility, poor reading skills and lack of schemata (Grabe, 1991; Birch, 2002; Alyousef, 2006; Rahman, 2004; Fitriani, 2014).

Those problems are found in several situations. For example, the EFL reader may have difficulty to differentiate between the various meanings of the same word, e.g. to differentiate between homonyms or homophones. The word "left" has more than one meaning and the word pronounced "rite" has four spellings, viz., rite, write, right and wright and a host of meanings. In this sense, the EFL reader who only knows one meaning of the word right may easily misunderstand the meaning of a sentence with right in it. On the other hand, knowledge about collocations, idioms and proverbs is also important to be learned by the EFL reader. The reader will not get the real meaning of an idiom or a proverb if they translate it literally. Nuttal (2000) has mentioned that complex noun groups, nominalizations, co-ordinating conjunctions,

participial phrases, and prepositional phrases tend to be the cause of many problems in reading comprehension because those elements make texts more complex and harder to understand by EFL students.

In other situations, a reader may not understand a text because she may lack background knowledge about what she is reading. Goodman (1979) has said that even the most excellent readers frequently have difficulty to connect what they already know before they read something. Furthermore, reading comprehension problems can be categorized into linguistic and non-linguistic reading problems.

Linguistic reading problems

Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2003) have said that linguistic knowledge is the unconscious knowledge about the linguistic system of sounds, structures, meanings, words, and rules for putting them all together. Regarding the reading comprehension issue, Lili (2014, p. 136) has noted that "good readers recognize, and decode quickly and accurately, words, grammatical structures and other linguistic features, and are unaware of the process as they engage in it." While poor readers frequently encounter linguistic reading problems. The linguistic reading problems include semantic, lexical, and syntactical reading problems. Semantic complexities include lack of vocabulary knowledge especially about acceptable collocations. While lexical complexities involve lack of knowledge about derivations and word classes. Then, syntactical complexities include lack of knowledge about acceptable sentence structure and acceptable grammar.

Non-linguistic reading problems

Non-linguistic reading problems refer to any reading problem which is unconnected to the reader's linguistic abilities. They include difficulty to connect ideas in the text, difficulty to differentiate the main and supporting points in the text, lack of a good reading strategy, lack of cultural knowledge, the text length, lack of background knowledge, lack of working memory and inability or never been trained to do speed reading.

Studies of reading comprehension problems

Parallel studies related to reading problems in EFL have been conducted by different researchers. One of them was conducted by Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2015) in Oman to investigate problems which Omani students had in reading English materials. Their investigations

included the area of pronunciation in order to investigate whether the students had difficulty in pronouncing English words. This study was conducted by distributing eight items with common and general reading comprehension problems that these EFL students possible had. The results showed that the students had various problems with reading, especially with vocabulary. Samad, Raisha and Fitriani (2017) conducted a study to count the frequency use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies by students when they read English texts. Different from the studies above, the current study focussed only on reading comprehension and tried to investigate the EFL students' reading comprehension problems based on linguistic and non-linguistic areas.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

The participants of this research were fifty EFL students in their fifth semester with the English Education Department at Syiah Kuala University in the latter half of 2014 in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. However, eight students did not complete all the questions completely. They left some blanks on the *English Reading Comprehension Questionnaire*. Thus, only forty two questionnaires were fully completed. As a result, only 42 questionnaires could be analyzed for the purposes of this study. Next, the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively to get the mean scores and the percentages.

Data Collection and Instrument

The "English Reading Comprehension Questionnaire" was a close-ended questionnaire with eighteen statements in which the participants were required to choose the answer which describes them well. The four Likert scale answers provided in the questionnaire were (i) always, (ii) usually, (iii) rarely and (iv) never. These close-ended questionnaire items were adapted and modified from Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2015). In addition, the questionnaire was divided into two main sections. The first section had ten statements devoted to linguistic reading comprehension complexities, including semantic problems, lexical problems, and syntactical problems. While the second section had eight statements which were concerned with non-linguistic reading comprehension complexity factors. Each participant was required to give answers to the eighteen items within 30 minutes.

Procedures for data analysis

This study was designed specifically to investigate the EFL students' reading comprehension problems in their EFL classroom. In this research, the *English Reading Comprehension Problems* were used. The mean score and simple percentage calculation were applied to the data quantitatively. The collected data was then fed into a computer with the Microsoft Excel program. Furthermore, to easily describe the result of the questionnaires analysis of each item, the students' reading comprehension problems level classification is provided below:

Table 1. The Levels of Reading Comprehesion Problems

Level	Categories	Likert Scale	Point	Score Range
Difficult	Interferes with reading comprehesion	Always	4	3.1-4.0
		Usually	3	2.1-3.0
Easy	Doesnot interfere with reading comprehension	Rarely	2	1.1-2.0
		Never	1	0-1.0

To process the questionaire, the participants' answers were grouped into two categories. The group who chose 'usually' and 'always' were categorized as the participants who faced reading problems. While the participants who chose 'never' and 'rarely' were categorized as the participants who did not encounter many reading problems

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Below are the results from the analysis of the questionnaires analysis on the ten items of linguistic reading comprehension problems from the 42 participants.

Table 2. Linguistic Reading Comprehension Problems Encountered by The Participants in Comprehending English Texts

Item of Complexity	M	SD	Category	Percentage
New vocabulary	3.2	0.4	Always interferes with reading comprehension	81%
Compound complex sentences	3.0	0.7	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	76%
Conditional sentences	2.8	1	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	74%
Word derivation	2.8	0.9	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	71%
Word order	3.0	0.7	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	71%
Complex sentences	2.9	0.7	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	69%
Compound sentences	2.8	0.7	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	64%
Reduced relative clauses	2.9	0.8	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	64%
Passive voice	2.6	0.9	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	60%
Tenses	2.6	1.1	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	55%
Overall linguistic reading problems	**2.8**	**0.2**	**Usually interferes with reading comprehension**	69%

The data above shows that there were ten areas of linguistic reading problems which were usually encountered by the participants since the mean scores of all ten items were between 2.60 and 3.20. Table 4.2 above shows that the students' biggest linguistic reading problems in comprehending English texts were semantic problems. To be specific, 34 from 42 participants (81%) had their biggest problems in reading English texts because they had a lack of vocabulary knowledge and did not understand the meaning of new vocabulary. They pointed out that unfamiliar vocabulary interfered with their comprehension.

The second biggest lot of student linguistic reading problems were syntactical problems. Interestingly, the results indicated that there were three very big syntactical reading problems which were faced by the students amongst the eight syntactical reading problems. In this vein,

31 of the 42 students (74%) emphasized that they had problems understanding compound complex sentences in the texts. While 31 students (74%) had difficulty understanding conditional sentences and 30 (71 %) of the students identified certain word orders that interfered with their comprehension.

The lexical problems followed next, where 71% of the students had difficulty in understanding word derivations which indicated that word derivation also interfered with their reading comprehension. This was followed by the complexity in understanding complex sentences (69%), compound sentences (64%), reduced relative clauses (64%), passive voice (60%), and difficulties with tenses (55%). Overall, the final result for the linguistic reading problems was that 69% of the students experienced linguistic reading problems in reading English texts. The overall linguistic reading problems mean score was at the difficult level but only at "usually interferes with reading comprehension"level because the score was 2.84 out of 4.

Table 3. Non-Linguistic Reading Comprehension Problems Encountered by The Participants in Comprehending English Texts

Item of Complexity	M	SD	Category	Point ≥2 Percentage
Lack of cultural knowledge	2.6	0.7	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	67%
Text length	2.9	0.8	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	67%
Lack of reading strategy knowledge	2.6	1.0	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	62%
Difficulty to differentiate main & supporting ideas	2.5	0.8	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	60%
Working memory problem	2.6	0.8	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	57%
Difficulty to connect ideas	2.7	0.9	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	55%
Speed reading	2.5	0.8	Usually interferes	55%

			with reading comprehension	
Lack of background knowledge	2.6	0.9	Usually interferes with reading comprehension	48%
Overall non-linguistic problems	**2.6**	**0.1**	**Usually interferes with reading comprehension**	**59%**

The table above shows that the mean scores for all areas of non-linguistic reading comprehension problems were between 2.50 and 2.90. This means that all eight areas of non-linguistic reading problems usually interfere with the respondents' reading comprehension. Further, the table above shows that lack of cultural knowledge and text length have become two of the biggest non-linguistic problems encountered by these students. In this way, 28 out of 42 (67%) students noted that lack of cultural knowledge made it difficult for them to understand texts. Similarly, 67% of the students also remarked that long texts make them tired and this influences their focus and understanding of texts.

Another difficulty the students faced was lack of reading strategy knowledge. 62% pointed out that they did not have ideas about reading strategies. The rest of the non-linguistic student reading problems followed with students having difficulty to differentiate main and supporting ideas (60%), working memory problems (57%), speed reading problems (55%), difficulty to connect ideas (55%), and lack of background knowledge (48%). These results showed that the number of students who had difficultes with non-linguistic reading problems was 59%. While the overall non-linguistic reading problems mean score was at the difficult level but only at "usually interferes with reading comprehension" level because the mean score was 2.63 out of 4.

Table 4. Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Students' Reading Comprehension Problems Percentage Average Comparison and Mean Score

Reading Problems	M	SD	Percentage	Category
Linguistic reading problems	2.8	**0.4**	69%	Usually interferes with reading comprehension
Non-linguistic reading	2.6	0.13	59%	Usually interferes

problems				with reading comprehension

The table above compares the final results from both the linguistic and the non-linguistic reading problems faced by the students when reading English. The data shows that the students' reading problems are dominated by linguistic reading problems. The linguistic reading problems percentage was slightly higher than the non-linguistic reading problems mean percentage.

Table 5. The Major Reading Comprehension Problem

Item of Complexity	M	SD	F of N/R	N/R %	F of U/A	U/A%
New vocabulary	3.0	0.8	8	19	34	81%

As can be seen in the table above, the mean score for the problem *meaning of new vocabulary* was 3.0 which indicated that this kind of reading comprehension complexity interfered with the participants' reading comprehension. In addition, eight of 42 participants chose 'Never' and 'Rarely' on the questionnaire. As a result, it could be concluded that only 19% of the participants did not encounter - *meaning of new vocabulary* as their main reading comprehension problem. While the rest of the participants, 34 of 42 participants chose either the 'Usually' or the 'Always' option on the questionaire. In other words, 81% of the participants indicated that not knowing the meaning of words interfered with their reading comprehension. therefore this kind of difficulty was considered the major reading comprehension problem encoutered by the participants.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, this research was designed to investigate what reading comprehension problems the students encountered in their EFL reading classroom, and among those problems which were the major problem for them. This research was done by distributing a questionnaire to 50 students from the English Education Department at Syiah Kuala University. The findings of this study showed that the students encountered a number of reading comprehension problems, both linguistic and non-linguistic. All the items of complexity listed in

the questionnaire were at the level of difficult. As a result, the participants experienced difficulty with each one of the reading comprehension problems listed. Based on the mean scores the linguistic reading comprehension problems which interfered with the participants' reading comprehension most were new vocabulary meanings, word complexity, compound complex sentences, conditional sentences, word derivation, word order, complex sentences, compound sentences, reduced relative clauses, passive voice, and tenses. While the non-linguistic reading comprehension problems which interfered with the participants' reading comprehension the most included lack of cultural knowledge, text length, lack of reading strategy knowledge, difficulty to differentiate between the main and the supporting ideas, working memory problems, difficulty to connect ideas and inability to do speed reading.

Unfamiliar vocabulary was the most frequent problem interfering with the students reading comprehension. The problem of the meaning of new words scored 3.00 out of 4, and 81% of the participants considered this as their most serious reading comprehension problem. While the rest of the reading comprehension problems were also at the level of difficult. Overall, the participants linguistic reading comprehension problems (69%, M=2.8) were slightly higher than their non-linguistic reading comprehension problems (59%, M=2.6).

The findings from this study have several pedagogical implications. Students should be aware of their reading problems in order to specifically know what are their difficulties in reading comprehension and make efforts to overcome them.

Based on the results, the meaning of new words was seen by students as the major obstacle to comprehending new texts. Therefore, it is necessary for students to focus on their vocabulary development. One of the best efforts which may be made by the students to improve vocabulary is by improving their reading habits and frequency of reading, because the more one reads the more vocabulary one will learn and know. It is generally known that to be a skillful reader needs effort and the skills will develop automatically if one reads a lot. Students should also learn techniques and games for building vocabulary like playing charades and doing cross-word puzzles.

To English teachers and EFL reading instructors, it is suggested that they should be aware of their students' reading comprehension problems both linguistic and non-linguistic and be ready to help them by introducing and practicing efforts to overcome them. Regarding not

knowing the meaning of new words as the major reading comprehension problem, teachers are expected to encourage and support their students to improve their vocabulary knowledge as quickly as possible.

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