SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS’ DIFFICULTIES IN READING COMPREHENSION

By
Zuhra

Al muslim University, Bireuen

ABSTRACT

This study aims at finding out the most difficult types of reading comprehension questions faced by students in reading tests and why they face these difficulties in the national examinations. Purposive sampling was used and the sample selected was 24 12th grade students of senior high school Lhokseumawe. The instruments used were a test, a questionnaire, and an interview guide. Based on the results from the test, the researcher found that the most difficult type of reading comprehension question faced by the students was an inference question, and this type of question was also classified into the difficult questions based on the index of difficulty formula. After analyzing the data from the questionnaire, it was found that most of students failed to answer the inference questions correctly because they did not fully understand what was being asked and because of weakness in understanding the reading comprehension questions. From the interview, the researcher found that the students had an inadequate knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure but they lacked knowledge about different types of reading comprehension questions. It can be concluded that there were some factors that caused difficulties for the students in answering these tests. First, the students did not comprehend the questions asked due to their weaknesses in differentiating between the natures of different types of reading comprehension questions. Their difficulties were also influenced by their weaknesses in mastering a wide range of vocabulary and sentence structures.

Key Words: Reading Difficulties, Reading Comprehension Test, High School EFL Learners
INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of four language skills that must be taught to ESL students. Celce-Murcia (1991:195) stated that “reading has become one of the primary curricular concerns in the second and foreign language program”. It has become a curricular concern of language programs in Indonesia because reading is one of the English language skills. English is also one subject examined in the annual National Examinations (NU).

The importance of teaching reading is to build the ability and knowledge of students. In teaching reading, there are a set of learning goals that must be achieved by the students; the ability to read a wide range of texts in English, the ability to adapt the reading style according to the reading purpose (i.e. skimming, scanning), the ability to build knowledge of the English language, the ability to build schematic knowledge, the ability to develop an awareness of the structure of written texts in English, and the ability to take or assume a critical perspective concerning the contents of the texts (Hedge, 2003, as cited in Alyousef, 2005).

Reading is interconnected to other ESL skills. Brown (1994:283) stated that Reading will best be developed in association with writing, listening, and speaking activities”. In other words, reading has positive effects on students’ writing, listening, and speaking skills and should be taught in association with the three other language skills. Whilst reading, the students pick up some words and they will use them in writing or in speaking. For example, through reading they can build their vocabulary and they can improve their writing skills.

To read well means to understand what the researcher tries to present in his writing. This means that a reader needs background knowledge and competence when reading. Reading can be easy or difficult for students depending on factors inherent in the text, viz: the relationship between the text and the knowledge, and between the text and the competence of the reader. When reading, the readers’ knowledge and competence interact with the content of the text in order to comprehend the text.

In 2002/2003, the Department of National Education issued new regulations for the final examinations in particular for students at the highest academic level, the graduating students. Today, every graduating student either in the junior or in senior high school is required to take the UN (Ujian Nasional or National Examination). In
these National Examinations the students will be tested in major subjects, viz: mathematics, Indonesian, and English. To assess the students’ proficiency in English, students needed to answer fifty questions: fifteen questions to test listening skills and thirty five questions to test reading skills. Thus, most the questions (70%) in the national examinations were to test reading skills.

The data from the International Education Development Index (Indeks Pembangunan Pendidikan) showed that in 2010 Indonesia was ranked number 64, and in 2011 its rank had dropped to number 69 worldwide. Thus, the level of education in Indonesia in 2010 was relatively better than in 2011 (Shabri, 2013). Related to these problems, some research questions were formulated for this research:
1) What is the most difficult type of reading comprehension question for the students from SMA Negeri 2 Lhokseumawe?
2) Why did the students face difficulties in that type of reading comprehension question?

This study is, therefore, intended to find out the most difficult type(s) of reading comprehension questions faced by the students from SMA Negeri 2 Lhokseumawe and to find out why the students had difficulties with that type of reading comprehension question.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading Tests in Ujian Nasional

All teachers would probably agree that the primary reason for reading text is to understand it. This statement has been proved by Smith (1967:185), who said that “reading without comprehension is not reading and it (reading) is the ability to recognize, to pronounce, and to understand the printed symbols on a page”. In other words, reading is the process of reconstructing an author’s ideas and deriving meaning from a printed page through the ability to recognize printed words, knowledge of language, and previous reading and life experiences.

In the UN, there are thirty five questions in the English reading test. In this test, there are several different kinds of texts with various types of reading comprehension question. Before carrying out this study, the sets of national examination questions from 2010/2011 to 2012/2013 were analyzed in order to know the types of reading comprehension questions asked in UN.

The classification of types of reading comprehension questions was based on the key words used in the questions. For questions such as
“What is the main idea in the paragraph?” or “What is the passage primarily about?”, these questions were classified as the main idea question. Thus, the classification type of each comprehension question depended on the wording used in that question.

After the reading comprehension question types had been classified, the researcher then examined the types of questions in the UN. The results showed that in 2010/2011 questions, questions about details were more common. Then in 2011/2012, questions about details and inference were predominant. And in 2012/2013, questions about details were common again. Thus, for this study, the questions were compiled into one package from the last three years from UN with the same number of questions for each reading comprehension question type which was tested. In this study, five of each reading comprehension question types were selected. To get five questions for each type of reading comprehension question type, some additional sets of the national examination test questions were needed. The types of reading comprehension questions tested were pronoun reference, main idea, inference, details stated, details unstated, communicative purpose, vocabulary in context, and jumbled sentence questions.

Reading in English

Reading is a skill and there are many strategies to learn reading, and many factors affect reading comprehension. There have been many studies about reading, but they were merely studies which study reading specifically, such as a study about reading comprehension question types.

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, Oakhill, Barnes, and Bryant (2001). This study found that students commonly failed in inference-making because they were 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 an 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 (Oakhill, Barnes, & Bryant, 2001:857).

Moreover, students can be successful or fail in reading depending on the type of text being read. As a study conducted by Schoenbach, et al. (1999) found that readers will face difficulties in reading when they
are unfamiliar with the particular language structure and features of the text and then their language-processing ability will break down. Students who are less interested in reading, with low motivation use few metacognitive strategies to monitor their learning from the text, and have inadequate vocabulary and background knowledge with which to connect and link new ideas to previous learning are often failed in reading comprehension (Klinger, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2007:4). Calvo (2005:62) further states that “readers with large vocabularies will be more likely to find in their memory words with which to represent the inference that they are drawing”. In other words, the more knowledge of vocabulary that a reader has, the easier it is for the reader to produce inferences.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used in this study was a mixed-mode approach. This means that both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used in this study. The quantitative approach was used to obtain data about the most difficult types of reading comprehension questions faced by the students and why the students faced these difficulties. This data was obtained by using a test, a questionnaire and an interview guide.

Gay et al. (2006:9) asserted that “quantitative research is the collection and analysis of numerical data in order to explain, predict, and/or control phenomena of interest”. Specifically in quantitative research, the researcher must state the hypotheses that could predict the results of the research before the study begins (Gay et al., 2006:18). Quantitative research involves studies that make use of statistical analyses to obtain their findings, require a degree of control and manipulation of phenomena control and the key features include formal and systematic measurement (Marczyk, DeMatteo, & Festinger, 2005; Cohen, Lawrence, & Keith, 2007).

On the other hand, Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006:399) explained that “qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data in order to gain insight into a particular phenomenon of interest”. Thus, in a qualitative research, the researchers collect, analyze, and interpret data descriptively in order to capture the particular phenomenon of interest. The data for qualitative research will be collected by using instruments such as
audio-visual data (videotape and photos) and documents (observation sheets, interviews and questionnaires (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

The researcher also used a qualitative approach. This was used to explore the students’ perceptions about their own difficulties in the reading tests and an interview was used to obtain this data.

In this study, the sources of data were from the students and their teacher. The data were obtained by distributing some instruments. The instruments were a test, a questionnaire, and an interview. The test was used to find the most difficult type of reading comprehension question faced by the students in the reading tests. The tests used were some packages from the UN questions from the last three years.

The researcher also employed a questionnaire. It was used to find out the reasons why the students faced difficulties in the reading exam. Closed-ended questions were used in this study. It was a kind of questionnaire in which the researcher provided optional answers so the students can choose one option based on their own opinions. These optional answers were adapted from various sources. They can be seen in the table that follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Responses to Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>Because the student has difficulties to comprehend the question or they do not know what kind of question is asked of them (adapted from the teacher’s statement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>Because the lesson has never been learnt before (developed from an idea from Klinger, Vaughn, &amp; Boardman, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>Because there are many new words in the text. (adapted from Schoenbach, et al., 1999; Calvo, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>Because of grammatical complexity (adapted from Schoenbach, et al., 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.</td>
<td>Because of the length of the text used (adapted from Schoenbach, et al., 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>Because they do not have background knowledge about the text (adapted from Klinger, Vaughn, &amp; Boardman, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g.</td>
<td>Because they never read the text before (adapted from Schoenbach, et al., 1999)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lastly, to obtain data using interviews, the researcher used an interview guide which consisted of several questions. The questions were related to the teacher’s teaching strategies and the students’
reading difficulties. A semi-structured interview was used in order to get much more information so as to study the problems deeply and to verify the other information that the researcher had obtained (Sugiyono, 2008). In this case, the researcher used some questions in order to gather specific information from the teacher. The questions in the interview were formulated based on the classifications in the questionnaire. This meant that the questions were adapted from some theories about the difficulties.

The data from this study was analyzed using some formulae. To analyze the results of test, a formula was used to index the difficulty and to find out the most difficult type of reading comprehension question for the students from the XIIth year at SMA Negeri 2 Lhokseumawe. The formula used was proposed by Arikunto (2012: 223):

\[ P = \frac{B}{JS} \]

Secondly, the data collected from questionnaire were calculated with the percentage formula as mentioned in Sudjana (2001: 129):

\[ p = \frac{f}{N} \times 100\% \]

Lastly, the researcher used interview results of which are discussed qualitatively. The data from the interviews was transcribed by using a transcription convention model. The transcription convention which was used in this study was adapted from King and Harrock (2010), as cited in Kumagai (2013: 51).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Test**

After gathering the data from test, it was found that the rank of difficulty in reading comprehension type of questions faced by the students was the inference type as the most difficult. The inference type was classified into the most difficult type faced by the students because there were only four students who could answer each question of this type correctly.
**Questionnaire**

Based on the responses of students to all the questions it can be concluded that most of them faced difficulties because they did not comprehend the meaning of questions or they do not understand the type of question that they were asked. In this case, the students did not have the knowledge or skills to recognize the various different types of reading comprehension questions. This can be proved as most of the students responded to the options in the questionnaire and these options achieved the highest score of the students’ responses. The students also faced difficulties in English because of their poor vocabulary. Many students failed to find the correct answers to the vocabulary questions. A number of 23% of students’ response showed that they faced difficulties because their vocabulary was inadequate.

Besides poor vocabulary, their grammar was also inadequate. As we know, to understand the reading texts the students need to understand the meaning of words and they also should have good grammar comprehension. As a result of having poor vocabulary and poor grammar, the students had difficulties in understanding the texts and accordingly they failed to answer the questions correctly. In this case, the students need to acquire adequate vocabulary and know how to use it accurately in context in order to overcome their difficulties.

The students also faced difficulties when the texts used were long and/or the sentences in the texts were long and complicated with various different modifying phrases. The students faced these difficulties because they did not know the meaning of many words in the texts and the texts or sentences used were long. It is believed that if the students have adequate vocabulary and good grammar comprehension, the length of the text used in the test will not be a problem and they will be able to comprehend the text easily.

Another reason why the students faced difficulties was the students did not have sufficient background knowledge to understand the texts, the lessons had not been learnt properly and/or they had never read a similar text before.

Thus, based on the students’ responses to the questionnaire, it appears that most of them faced difficulties to comprehend the questions asked. This was made worse by their weakness in understanding the different types of reading comprehension question, plus the weaknesses in their vocabulary and grammar.
Interview

From the transcription of interviews with both the teacher and the students, the researcher found that the students faced difficulties in reading because they had not mastered a wide range of vocabulary and grammar and did not have good understanding about the different types of reading comprehension questions. The students are poor in recognizing the types of reading comprehension question because the teacher did not teach them about the different types of reading comprehension questions. Because of these problems, the students failed the reading comprehension test.

CONCLUSIONS

This study discovered that the most difficult reading comprehension question type faced by the students was the inference type. Moreover, based on the index of difficulty analysis, the researcher found that all the inference type questions were difficult for the students. Therefore, this reading comprehension question type was classified as the most difficult type of reading comprehension question faced by the students at SMAN 2 Lhokseumawe.

Based on the students’ responses to the questionnaire, particularly, to each of the inference questions, the researcher found that the students frequently responded using the first answer, option (a). Most of the students failed to answer the inference questions correctly because they do not comprehend the questions which were asked.

From the students’ responses to the questionnaire, they revealed that they faced difficulties because they did not comprehend the questions that were asked. Only 27% of their answers to the inference category of questions were correct. Then, the students also faced the difficulties because their weaknesses in vocabulary mastery. A number of 23% of students responded toward this reason.

Grammatical complexity is also a reason why the students failed to answer the questions correctly. A number of 15% of students responded to this point. They revealed that they faced the difficulties in answering the reading comprehension questions because the texts used were long. Furthermore, 9% of the responses showed that they never read the text, 8% did not have any background knowledge about the text, and 4% responded that the lesson(s) was never taught before.

In addition, the interviews with both the English teacher and the students revealed that the students faced difficulties in English because
their vocabulary was poor, and so was their grammar. They had no prior knowledge about the different types of reading comprehension questions. As the result, most of the students failed to answer or gave failed answers to the reading comprehension question that were asked. Most of the questions were also classified as difficult questions based on the formula for indexing difficulty in the questions.

SUGGESTIONS

This study revealed that most of the students failed to answer reading comprehension questions correctly. In particular, the inference questions were the most difficult type of reading comprehension question faced by the students. This study also provided reasons why the students faced difficulties with these questions. Mostly, the students failed in the reading comprehension tests because of poor vocabulary, poor mastery of grammar, and lack of knowledge regarding different types of reading comprehension question.

It is suggested that teachers need to apply various teaching techniques in teaching reading in order to achieve better reading comprehension. Here, the teachers also need to be selective in using teaching techniques that are the most appropriate. The teachers need to teach their students about the different types of reading comprehension question to make these questions more comprehensible and more understood by the students. Thus, the students will know how to differentiate the different types of questions and they will know how to answer the different types of reading comprehension question asked. As a result, they will not face so many difficulties in answering the different types of reading comprehension question.

For further researchers, it is suggested to conduct a longitudinal study to investigate how the students use their cognitive and metacognitive strategies while reading a text and finishing a test, the students’ learning preferences, as well as how the students face their problems in reading. Additionally, it may also be possible to investigate the processes of teaching and learning including the implementation of different teaching techniques by the teachers especially in teaching reading skills and also the interaction between the teachers and the students.
REFERENCES


