

A Study on the Challenges Faced by Indonesian University Students in Understanding English Reading Texts

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Abstrak Bahasa Inggris diakui secara luas sebagai salah satu bahasa paling penting di dunia saat ini. Penyebaran global dan pentingnya bahasa Inggris telah menjadikannya alat yang krusial untuk mengakses pengetahuan, berpartisipasi dalam diskusi akademis, dan berkomunikasi lintas budaya. Akibatnya, kemahiran dalam bahasa Inggris—terutama dalam pemahaman bacaan—telah menjadi tujuan utama dalam lingkungan pendidikan, terutama di tingkat perguruan tinggi. Oleh karena itu, bahasa Inggris diajarkan di sekolah formal. Di Indonesia, bahasa Inggris merupakan mata pelajaran wajib bagi mahasiswa perguruan tinggi. Keterampilan belajar bahasa Inggris di bidang akademik seringkali berbentuk teks. Artinya, kemampuan membaca diperlukan untuk dapat memahami teks tersebut. Penelitian ini berfokus pada penyelidikan kesulitan pemahaman membaca bagi mahasiswa perguruan tinggi. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menilai kemampuan pemahaman membaca mahasiswa dari dua universitas di Bandung dalam memahami teks bahasa Inggris. Faktor-faktor yang berkontribusi terhadap kesulitan mahasiswa dalam memahami teks bahasa Inggris di universitas yang dipilih juga dianalisis dalam penelitian ini. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif untuk menganalisis dan menyajikan analisis mendalam terhadap data yang dikumpulkan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa di Kampus A, sebagian besar peserta dikategorikan dalam tingkat kesulitan “STRONG”, menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa mengalami tantangan signifikan dalam pemahaman membaca bahasa Inggris. Di sisi lain, sebagian besar mahasiswa di Kampus B masuk ke dalam kategori “LEMAH”, menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan mereka relatif minimal. Analisis lebih lanjut mengidentifikasi empat faktor utama yang berkontribusi terhadap kesulitan mahasiswa dalam memahami teks bahasa Inggris: keterbatasan kemampuan bahasa, pengetahuan latar belakang yang tidak memadai, motivasi yang rendah, dan strategi membaca yang tidak memadai. Di antara faktor-faktor tersebut, keterbatasan pengetahuan bahasa muncul sebagai faktor utama yang menghambat kemampuan pemahaman membaca mahasiswa.

Kata kunci: Kesulitan, Teks Membaca Bahasa Inggris, mahasiswa.

Abstract English is widely acknowledged as one of the most essential languages in the world today. The global spread and importance of English have made it a crucial tool for accessing knowledge, engaging in academic discourse, and participating in cross-cultural communication. As a result, proficiency in English—particularly in reading comprehension—has become a key objective in educational settings, especially at the tertiary level. Therefore, it is taught in formal school. In Indonesia, English language is a mandatory course for college students. The skill of English learning in academic field is often in the form of text. It means the reading ability is necessary to be able to comprehend the text. This research focuses on investigating the difficulties of reading comprehension for college students. The aims of this study is to assess the reading comprehension proficiency of students from two universities in Bandung in understanding English texts. The factors contributing to students' difficulties in comprehending English texts across the selected universities are also analyzed in this

research. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach in order to examine and present an in-depth analysis of the collected data. The findings of the study indicate that at Campus A, the majority of participants were categorized under the “STRONG” level of difficulty, suggesting that students experienced significant challenges in English reading comprehension. In contrast, most students at Campus B fell into the “WEAK” category, implying that their difficulties were relatively minimal. Further analysis identified four primary factors contributing to students’ struggles in understanding English texts: limited language proficiency, insufficient background knowledge, low motivation, and inadequate reading strategies. Among these, limited language knowledge emerged as the most prominent factor hindering students’ reading comprehension abilities.

Keywords : Difficulty, English Reading text, student.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is used by every human in the world to communicate each other. As its function of communication, language has been the most important aspect in human being. In term of communication, it is not used only by people in the same country, but also it is used by people around the world. Therefore, there is an international language that has been formed in convention as unifying language that is English Language. Thus, English Language has become a compulsory subject in every formal school and college.

English language acquisition involves the development of four essential skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these, reading plays a vital role and is a fundamental component in the English language learning process. Reading is often considered as the most important skill that students must have the capability on it (reading). It is because there are many non-English subjects that use English language in the book as the material of its subject. Beside English language is used in the formal school, people often find the reading activity such in working activity and daily activity that use English language. This aligns with Komiyama's (2009) assertion that reading contributes significantly to the development of overall language proficiency and serves as a gateway to essential information in both academic and professional settings. Consequently, this has led researchers to pursue further investigation into reading-related activities.

In term of reading activity, the first researcher has done the research focused on analyzing the level of reading comprehension in four reading courses and it was applicated as the case study by the academic year in 2020/2021 for students from 2 universities in Bandung. From the result of its research, the researchers found that there are different achievements in the score from those two Universities as the data. In Campus B, the students’ ability is categorized as bad comprehension because they achieve under 70% of comprehension. Based on this result of the research, the researchers extended their investigation to examine the specific challenges encountered by students from four different universities in Bandung in understanding English reading texts.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify the underlying factors contributing to students’ difficulties in comprehending English reading texts. Drawing upon Alderson (2000) theoretical framework, five primary factors are considered: linguistic competence, background knowledge, learner motivation, insufficient reading strategies, and the cognitive process involved in reading. Furthermore, the study seeks to determine which of these factors constitutes the most significant barrier to students’ reading comprehension.

Research Objectives:

1. To assess the reading comprehension proficiency of students from two universities in Bandung in understanding English texts.
2. To investigate the underlying factors contributing to students' challenges in comprehending English texts across the selected universities.

The urgency and innovation of this research

As a matter of fact, that Reading Comprehension is one of the most important learning to improve English skill, the researcher finds innovation to find out the cause of difficulties faced by students from 4 universities in comprehending English Reading text.

The definition of Reading Comprehension

Woolley (2011) defines reading comprehension as the act of deriving meaning from written text. The primary objective of reading is to construct a comprehensive understanding of the text as a whole, rather than focusing on the interpretation of individual words or sentences in isolation. As readers, particularly young learners, engage with a text, they actively build mental models—internal representations that reflect the intended meaning of the ideas conveyed. In support of this, Robert (p. 63) explains that comprehension involves the generation of meaning through various channels, including direct observation, reading, interpreting visual elements such as signs or artwork, listening to spoken information, or watching audiovisual content. Based on these perspectives, In summary, reading comprehension can be understood as the process through which readers construct meaning by engaging with a written text.

Factors of Student's Challenges in Comprehending (English) Reading Text

When engaging with a reading text, particularly in the context of students, various factors may hinder their ability to comprehend the content effectively. These challenges are influenced by multiple components that interact during the reading process. Referring to Alderson's (2000) theoretical framework, several key factors are identified as contributing to reading comprehension difficulties in English.

1. Language knowledge

Krashen & Terrel, T.D., (1998) suggest that vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role in reading comprehension, as understanding the meaning of individual words is fundamental to grasping the overall message of a sentence or passage. When a text contains a high number of unfamiliar words, readers may struggle to make sense of the content, which significantly impedes their comprehension process. This perspective aligns with Alderson's (2000) assertion that the presence of unfamiliar vocabulary can significantly diminish both the enjoyment and understanding of a text. Consequently, linguistic knowledge—particularly vocabulary mastery—emerges as a critical component in successful reading comprehension. A lack of familiarity with key terms can hinder students from constructing meaning from the text, thereby becoming a major source of difficulty during the reading process.

2. Learner's Background knowledge

Background knowledge refers to learners' existing understanding of the world, which encompasses both general and cultural knowledge. This prior knowledge serves as a foundation that readers draw upon to connect new information encountered in a text with what they already know. By activating relevant background knowledge, readers are better able to interpret, integrate, and retain the content being read.

3. Motivation

Motivation plays a significant role in the process of reading comprehension, as readers who lack interest or engagement in the subject matter are more likely to struggle with understanding the text. Without sufficient motivation, readers may become distracted or disengaged, which can lead to reduced focus and ineffective comprehension.

4. The lack reading strategies

Another significant factor contributing to challenges in reading comprehension is the lack of reading strategies. Readers who have developed and apply appropriate reading techniques are better equipped to process texts efficiently and overcome potential obstacles. Conversely, a lack of such strategies can prevent readers from successfully navigating difficulties in the text, ultimately hindering their ability to fully comprehend the material.

State of Art

The aim of this research is to find out the factors of difficulties faced by students from two Universities in Bandung in comprehending English Reading text. The data in this research will be collected and analyzed by the theory of Alderson (2000) about difficulties in Reading Comprehension. There are four factors of Student's Difficulties in Reading Comprehension. They

are language knowledge, learner's background knowledge, motivation, the lack of reading strategies, and reading process. Thus, the highest factor of difficulties is also analyzed in this research.

Several previous studies have explored the causes of difficulties in reading comprehension. Prihartini (2020) investigated the reading comprehension challenges faced by tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Sukodadi. Using interviews and document analysis, including student worksheets, she found that students struggled with various levels of comprehension—literal, inferential, critical, and creative. The greatest difficulties were observed at the creative comprehension level. Factors contributing to these challenges included insufficient instructional support, low student interest, and limited vocabulary knowledge.

Similarly, Saraswati et al., (2021) conducted a study on eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 4 Tegalalang, focusing on specific aspects of reading comprehension. Their findings revealed that students faced difficulties across five key areas: identifying the main idea, locating references, understanding vocabulary, making inferences, and finding specific information. The most problematic skill was determining the main idea, with 72% of students experiencing difficulty, followed closely by locating references (70%).

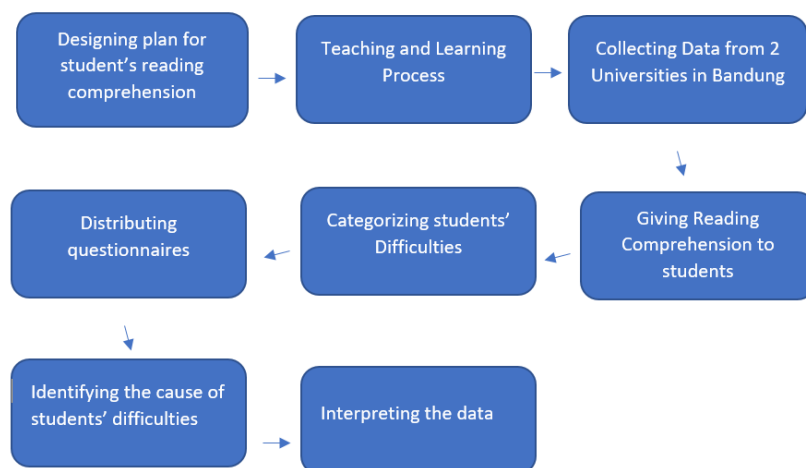
Satriani (2018) examined reading comprehension difficulties among English students at the Islamic University of Riau. The study identified several obstacles, including a lack of motivation to read, low reading skills, and challenges with complex and unfamiliar reading materials. Students reported needing considerable effort and time to remember and understand texts, especially those containing long or complicated sentences and unfamiliar vocabulary, which hindered their comprehension.

These studies collectively highlight that vocabulary knowledge, motivation, instructional quality, and text complexity are significant factors **influencing students' reading comprehension difficulties across different educational levels.**

2. METHODOLOGY

The methods which have been used in this research is the qualitative descriptive method. In this research, the researchers use case study and a case study is one of the type qualitative methods. The selected data will be taken from two universities in Bandung, they are Universitas Nasional PASIM Bandung and STAI Baitul Arqam.

The flow diagram of research, methods and outcome is presented in the figure as follows;



In collecting the data, the researchers use many instruments, such as reading comprehension that consist of 5 texts and every text consists of 5-10 questions as comprehension. After doing these comprehensions, the students will be given some written questions or questionnaire to be analyzed by the researchers. Those questions are about the difficulties faced by students in doing the comprehensions.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The students' reading ability in comprehending English text for students in Two Universities in Bandung.

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the reading comprehension skills of students from two universities located in Bandung. The first institution, referred to as Campus A, is situated in Bandung Regency, while the second, Campus B, is based in Bandung City. To assess the difficulties students face in understanding English texts, the researcher employed a Likert scale questionnaire. The responses were then quantified using percentage scores derived from the Likert scale data. The questionnaire items were specifically designed to measure the extent of students' challenges in reading comprehension, with response options aligned to a standardized Likert scale framework: a) very agree means 1, b) agree means 2, 3) neutral means 3, 4) disagree means 4, 5) very disagree means 5.

Using the questionnaire data, the researcher determined the criteria for each item by analyzing the corresponding percentage scores, which are summarized in the following table:

Criteria for students' difficulties adopted by Sugiyono (2016)

Percentage	Criterion
0 % - 20 %	Very weak
21 % - 40 %	Weak
41 % - 60 %	Average
61 % - 80 %	Strong
81 % - 100 %	Very Strong

Based on these criteria, the results regarding students' challenges in understanding English reading texts are presented in the table below;

Campus A

Criterion	Percentage
Very Weak	10 %
Weak	5 %
Average	20 %
Strong	60 %
Very Strong	5 %

The data in the table indicate that the majority of respondents were categorized under the "STRONG" difficulty level, suggesting that these students experienced significant challenges in understanding English reading texts.

Campus B

Criterion	Percentage
Very Weak	30 %
Weak	40 %

Average	7 %
Strong	13 %
Very Strong	10%

Based on the table, it was found that the majority of respondents fell into the "WEAK" category, indicating that they encountered relatively few difficulties in understanding English reading texts.

Following the assessment of students' reading comprehension challenges, the second objective of this study is to identify the underlying factors contributing to those difficulties;

The Factors of difficulties in comprehending English text for students in Two Universities in Bandung.

To support the data analysis aimed at identifying the factors behind students' difficulties in understanding English reading texts, this study utilized indicators derived from established theories. According to these frameworks, there are four primary causes contributing to reading comprehension challenges: limited language knowledge, insufficient learner background knowledge, lack of motivation, and inadequate use of reading strategies.

The Factors of difficulties in comprehending English text for students in Two Universities in Bandung.

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Campus A

Indicators	Percentage
Language knowledge	30 %
Learner's Background knowledge	27 %
Motivation	32 %
The lack reading strategies	11 %

Campus B

Indicators	Percentage
Language knowledge	27 %
Learner's Background knowledge	25 %

Motivation	32 %
The lack reading strategies	11 %

4. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This survey-based study aimed to explore students' perceptions regarding the factors that hinder their reading comprehension. Additionally, it examined the differences in the difficulties experienced by students during reading. The difficulties encountered in reading comprehension were classified into four principal categories, which serve as the framework for analysis in this study:

Linguistic Knowledge – referring to students' mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure necessary for understanding texts.

Background Knowledge – encompassing learners' prior understanding and familiarity with the topic or context of the reading material.

Motivation – relating to students' interest, engagement, and willingness to read and comprehend texts.

Reading Strategies – the presence or absence of effective techniques used by students to interpret and make sense of written content.

The average results reflected students' overall perception of the difficulties they encountered. While respondents were uncertain about facing significant challenges across all four categories, three specific aspects stood out as major obstacles. Notably, motivation was identified as the most influential factor affecting reading comprehension. Alderson emphasizes that readers' motivation plays a critical role in their reading outcomes. Research involving struggling readers in both first and second language contexts has demonstrated that low motivation impedes the development of reading skills, ultimately serving as a significant barrier to effective comprehension. Furthermore, readers attributed their low classroom performance in part to the limited availability of engaging English-language materials such as textbooks, novels, and cartoons that could stimulate interest and encourage independent reading. This highlights the essential role of educators in fostering reading motivation by carefully selecting reading materials that are relevant and appealing to students' interests.

Additionally, respondents reported difficulties when attempting to relate the content of a passage to their prior knowledge, which at times conflicted with the author's intended meaning. Although students expressed some uncertainty about the specific problems they faced, the average scores indicated that the higher the score, the greater the students' awareness of their reading challenges. Interestingly, among the overall categories of reading challenges, background knowledge—not motivation—was the problem that respondents were most uncertain about. Following this, lack of reading strategies ranked as the second most commonly perceived issue, while motivation and the reading process were recognized to a lesser extent by the students.

CONCLUSION

After gathering and analyzing the research data, the researcher drew conclusions regarding the challenges students face in comprehending English reading texts. The findings revealed that, at Campus A, the majority of students fell under the “STRONG” difficulty category, indicating significant struggles with reading comprehension. In contrast, most students at Campus B were classified within the “WEAK” difficulty range, suggesting they experienced fewer obstacles in understanding English texts. Regarding the underlying causes, four main factors were identified: limited language knowledge, insufficient learner background knowledge, low motivation, and a lack of effective reading strategies. Among these, language knowledge emerged as the most prominent factor contributing to students' challenges in comprehending English reading materials.

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