

READING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES AMONG TENTH GRADE STUDENTS OF VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

ABSTRACT

In regard to the need for reading comprehension ability in the school, the objective of this research is to identify: (1) the difficulties faced by tenth grade students of Vocational High School in reading comprehension and (2) the factors influencing students' reading comprehension difficulties. This research used both questionnaire and interview as the instruments of data collection. The data was analyzed based on the theory of Nuttal (1982) which reducing it by categorizing the relevant data. The participants of this study were tenth grade students of a Vocational High School in Medan. In doing this research, the procedures were gathering the data and information, reducing data, and drawing conclusion. The result of the research showed that: (1) most of the students have difficulties in determining main idea, locating reference, understanding vocabulary, and making inference and (2) the factors influencing their difficulties were limited vocabulary knowledge, lack of fluency, lack of familiarity of the subject matter, and the problems in recalling after reading. The result of this research is expected to be beneficial for English teachers to identify their students' difficulties in reading comprehension in order to have innovation or appropriate strategies in teaching reading and this research also can be useful for the students to be able to know their difficulties in reading skill.

Keywords: Difficulties, Reading Comprehension, Vocational High School

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is the ability to understand information in a text and interpret it appropriately what is meant by the text (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). In order to understand text, a reader must be able to identify words rapidly, know the meaning of almost all of the words, and be able to combine sequential units of meaning into a coherent message. Naturally, the majority of students who are very weak at word recognition will have serious difficulties with comprehension. Yet, it is recognized now that some students who develop adequate word-reading ability and fluency still have difficulty understanding what they are reading, particularly when faced with the expository style of writing used within many school textbooks (Cain & Oakhill, 2007).

Most researchers agree that reading comprehension is not simply recognizing individual words, or even understanding each individual word as our eyes pass over it. Reading is a very complex skill and for this reason it is not surprising to find that some children confront difficulties in learning to read. There were many researches conducted about reading comprehension difficulties. The researches conducted in Senior High School and University students, whereas the researches did in Vocational High School is still in a few numbers. Some of them are:

Recent study, Kasim and Raisha (2017) conducted a study determining the students' difficulties in reading comprehension. They found that EFL students in Banda Aceh have some reading comprehension problems, they were new vocabulary meanings, word complexity, passive voice, word order and tenses which are in the areas of linguistics. The major factor of their problems in comprehending English texts is unfamiliar vocabulary. Then, in the context of Vietnam, Thao and Tham (2018) found that the students in Vietnam did not have much trouble in dealing with reading ESP texts; nonetheless, it was sometimes seen that two common areas of difficulties in ESP reading comprehension students were faced with were the two common areas of difficulties in ESP reading comprehension were unknown words and background knowledge or subject matters. From the researches above, it can be concluded that reading comprehension is still be one of the difficult skills to be mastered by the students.

This phenomenon also exists in a high school in Medan, North Sumatera, Indonesia. Curriculum 2013 has been implemented for several years in Indonesia. Based on the syllabus of curriculum 2013 for tenth grade students (both Senior High School and Vocational High School) about reading skill, the students should be able to grasp the contextual meaning of any texts include descriptive texts, announcement, recount texts, narrative texts, and songs. One of the researchers had some experiences related to reading skill of the students when doing her internship in a classroom of office administration-majored tenth grade students at a Vocational high School in Medan which already implemented curriculum 2013 in the academic year of 2018/2019. In the beginning, the researcher delivered some texts to the students to be understood by them so they can answer the questions of the texts. However, they translate the text by using word for word translation or even used google translation which caused the difficulties in comprehending the texts. As a result, many students did not understand the text they read, they could not answer the comprehension tests such as finding the main idea, making connections,

etc. Those difficulties caused they got lower scores. Some of the reasons are they are not familiar with the subject matter, they have lack of vocabularies, etc. For the students, English is still a difficult subject as it is a foreign language.

The purposes of this study are to identify: (1) reading comprehension difficulties faced by tenth grade students in Vocational High School and (2) the factors influencing the difficulties in reading comprehension.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading and Reading Comprehension

Reading as discussed by Millrood (2011) is the process of both cognitive and visual activity that has purpose to extract meaning from the written text and process the information with existing experiences. “When the learners read a story or a newspaper, they expand range of respective skills. Consequently, reading is respective skills that require the readers’ ability to create interaction between the linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world.” Furthermore, Nunan (1989: 72) states that in reading, the readers do a reclusive activity in which the reader interacts with the text in isolation. This separated activity entangles many interactions between readers and what they bring to the text like prior knowledge and strategy use, as well as variables related to the text like interest in the text and understanding types of the text.

Reading comprehension has a deeper meaning to elaborate. Klingner (2007:2) states that reading comprehension is “the process of constructing meaning by coordinating a number of complex processes including word reading, word and world knowledge, and fluency”. It refers to the ability in interpreting the words, understanding the meaning and the relationships between ideas conveyed in a text. Mentioning, practicing, and assessing are the three steps procedure or instructions in teaching reading comprehension. That is, teachers mention the skills that the students want to use, then they give them opportunities to practice those skills through workbooks or work sheets, and finally assess whether or not they use the skill successfully.

Reading comprehension is not only reading the written text, but also involves cognitive and metacognitive process so that the readers get the target messages from the text. To comprehend, the readers must use information they already have to filter, interpret, organize and reflect upon the incoming information from the page. Efficient interpretation of text involves a combination of word recognition skills, linking of new information to prior knowledge, and application of appropriate strategies such as locating the main idea, making connections, questioning, inferring and predicting. Therefore, it is important to understand the concepts and references made in the reading.

Reading Comprehension Difficulties and Factors Influencing the Difficulties

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. Kasim and Raisha (2017) conducted a study determining the students' difficulties in reading comprehension. They found that EFL students in Banda Aceh have some reading comprehension problems, they were new vocabulary meanings, word complexity, passive voice, word order and tenses which are in the areas of linguistics. The major factor of their problems in comprehending English texts is unfamiliar vocabulary.

Nuttal (1982) states that there are five aspects of reading comprehension which regards as reading comprehension difficulties. The difficulties are determining main idea, locating reference, understanding vocabulary, making inference, and detail information. The main idea is a statement that tells the author's point about the topic. "Reference is antecedent of a pronoun. The antecedent is a word or phrase to which a pronoun refers" (Sharpe, 2005). Vocabularies can be understood by finding out new words meaning in dictionary and guessing the meaning from the context. Inference demands the students to comprehend the text to find the conclusion of the statements in the text. The detail question or information is used to check students' ability to understand material that is directly stated in the text. These difficulties are commonly found in the school.

Moreover, Westwood (2008) discussed that reading comprehension difficulties can be caused by a variety of different factors, including those intrinsic to the individual and others related to insufficient instruction or to inappropriate materials. Westwood (2008) shows that there are eight causes of reading comprehension difficulties, they are limited vocabulary

knowledge, lack of fluency, lack of familiarity of the subject matter, inadequate use of reading strategies, readability, weak verbal reasoning, problems in processing information, and problems in recalling after reading.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by using descriptive qualitative research. This research focused to analyze the data of interviewing tenth grade students related to their difficulties in reading comprehension.

The empirical data were collected through written and spoken interview, they were questionnaire and interview. The researcher used interview guidelines included questions related to the students' difficulties in comprehending English texts in their daily learning and the factors influencing their difficulties. The sources of data were 22 tenth grade students of a Vocational High School in Medan, North Sumatera.

Because of the situation in Indonesia, that there is Corona Virus Disease or well-known as "*COVID 19*," the writer did an online research. The researchers organized the questionnaire on google form and shared the link by Edmodo application as it was the students' learning media in the school. After answered the questionnaire, the students asked by the researcher to respond the researcher's questions in the interview section. The interview did by using voice note in WhatsApp.

In order to help us focus on key aspects of investigating a phenomenon. Van Manen (1997) suggested that deeper and exploratory interviewing was be used to explore and gather richer data. In fulfilling the ethics of research, participants were not mentioned. During the interviews, we used Bahasa Indonesia in order to get richer or deeper information about the participants' opinions and views on the English learning, especially reading comprehension.

Data reduction is a 'form of analysis that sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that final conclusion can be drawn and verified' (Miles and Huberman). In data reduction, we focused on relevant data and reduced the irrelevant ones. We looked for patterns and found themes to answer the research questions.

From the interview responses, a number of issues related to the reading comprehension difficulties emerged, such as the students' opinion about English learning, their difficulties in reading comprehension, and the factors influencing the difficulties. Afterwards, the analysis of data gathered used the theory of Reading Comprehension Difficulties discussed by Nuttal (1982). The researcher displayed the interview data by elaborating and aligning all the data. Based on the analysis, there were two emergent themes: the students' reading comprehension difficulties and the factors influencing their difficulties. In data conclusion and verification, the data emerged were verified by confirming other evidence to make sure that conclusions drawn were consistent.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire itself contains 10 questions and it consisted of 7 multiple choices and 3 essays. Meanwhile, there were three interview questions. There are two data presented along with supporting data: (1) the students' reading comprehension difficulties and (2) the factors influencing the difficulties in comprehending texts.

Reading Comprehension Difficulties

Determining main idea

There were many students admitted that they have difficulties in determining main idea. It can be seen from their answers on both questionnaire and interview.

There are some types of questions which is difficult to understand, such as determining main idea (AP, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

In answering questions of English texts, I usually find difficulty in determining main idea (AS, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

Many questions in English texts are difficult for me. I usually have difficulty in determining main idea (CS, Google form and WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

In my opinion, the English questions are difficult to be answered. I usually find difficulties in determining main idea (VS, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

Many participants reported that they have difficulties in determining main idea. However, there were some participants admitted that they are easy to determine the main idea of a paragraph in a text or a passage. In researcher's opinion, it is normal for the students to have difficulties in determining main idea because this acquires the students' ability to comprehend the whole text to determine the main idea, and it will be harder for the readers who do not know to identify the location of the main idea in the paragraphs, particularly for first year students.

Locating reference

In identifying reference, the students are expected to understand for what the pronouns in the sentences are used such as the pronouns that are used to show people, place, or situation. There are some students have difficulties in locating reference.

I have some difficulties in answering questions of English texts, such as locating reference (DM, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

Usually, it is easy for me to answer a question about locating reference (FJ, Google form, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

When my teacher gives us a test of reading comprehension, it is easy for me to answer the questions about locating reference (MM, Google form, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

One of difficult questions for me is locating reference (YJS, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

The collected data shows that many students stated are easy to answer question about reference. The researcher personally assume that it is easy to locate reference. It needs the reader's focus on one or two previous sentences to convince himself to know what does the word refers to. Tenth grade students should be able to do that as it is not too difficult though there are some references confusing the readers.

Understanding Vocabulary

Vocabulary concerned with synonym and antonym. Context helps the students making a general prediction about the meaning (Sharpe, 2005). The students who admitted have difficulties in understanding vocabulary listed as follows:

Personally, English questions are difficult, particularly about synonym (DL, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

I have difficulty in understanding vocabulary in English text which cause me could not answer the questions well (SD, Google form and WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

There were three students stated that they have difficulties in understanding vocabulary. Actually, the students need to master much vocabularies in order to answering questions, for instance, about synonym, because the word used usually not familiar or rarely used in daily conversation. Thus, the students with low vocabulary mastery will have difficulties in answering question related to synonym or antonym.

The second data earned about vocabulary is that there are a few students revealed that they can answer the questions about synonym easily. It is true if they have adequate vocabulary mastery.

Making inference

Kopitski (2007) stated that readers need to practice combining clues from the text with their background knowledge in order to make inferences. It means that the clues in the text will help students to build assumption and draw conclusion. It is no wonder if there are many students have difficulties in making inference because it requires higher order thinking.

There are some types of questions which is difficult to understand, one of them is making inference (AP, Google form and WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

I have difficulties in answering text questions which related to make conclusion (DN, Google form and WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

In my opinion, the English questions are difficult to be answered. I usually find difficulties in making inference (VS, Google form and WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

There are many questions which are really hard for me, for instance, making inference (YJS, Google form and WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

Most of students revealed that they are difficult to make a conclusion or inference. Obviously, it needs critical thinking. The students should be able to analyze the meaning of the text so that they can draw the conclusion.

Detail information

This is the last type of reading comprehension difficulties. This question used to check students' ability to understand material that is directly stated in the text.

The easiest question I usually find is detail information of texts (SD, Google form, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

I usually easier in looking for detail information in a text (YS, Google form, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

Based on data above, there is no student stated that he or she has difficulty in answered the question about detail information. Detail information means the information which had been stated directly on the text although it is not directly stated, there must be certain sentence as the direction for the readers to know the answer of the relevant questions. The researcher guesses that easiest question to be answered is detail information.

Factors Influencing the Difficulties in Reading Comprehension

The reading comprehension difficulties affected by several factors. The factors influencing the students' difficulties in reading comprehension were analyzed based on Westwood's theory.

Limited vocabulary knowledge

It is a reality that many students have limited vocabulary knowledge as it is not in small amount, particularly first year students.

I assume that my limited vocabulary knowledge causes my difficulties in reading comprehension texts (FJ, Google form and WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

Obviously, the inadequate vocabulary mastery gives negative impact in comprehending any texts (TS, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

I have low vocabulary mastery which may cause difficulties in grasp the meaning of a text (YJS, Google form and WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

Nowadays, vocabulary mastery is a common problem for the students in English subject for its limitless amount. There are too many vocabularies need to be mastered by the students in order to know the meaning of every word in a text. It is acceptable that tenth grade students usually have lower vocabulary mastery because they are at the first grade.

Lack of fluency

There are many students admitted that they have lack of fluency in reading English texts. There appears to be an optimum rate of fluency in reading that allows for accurate processing of information. Students who read very slowly – or much too fast – often comprehend poorly. Slow reading tends to restrict cognitive capacity to the low-level processing of letters and words rather than allowing full attention to be devoted to higher-order ideas and concepts within the text.

One of the factors causing reading comprehension difficulties IS the disfluency of reading English texts (AP, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

I assume that lack of fluency in reading texts is one of the factors causing difficulties (CC, Google form and WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

One of the factors causing my difficulties is the lack of fluency in reading texts (VS, Google form, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

I have difficulties because a lack of fluency in reading English texts (YJS, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

The data gathered about the factors causing reading comprehension difficulties shows that the many students have lack of fluency in reading English texts which causes they have the difficulties. Students who read very slowly – or much too fast – often comprehend poorly. It means that if a student read very slowly, it can cause he could not comprehend the text because he did not process the information well. Perhaps he will find difficulties in reading certain words or sentences of the text, so, there is a possibility that the previous sentences will be forgotten. He will not focus to comprehend the text well. It forces him to re-read the text to grasp the meaning well. Automatically, he needs more time to comprehend the entire text.

Lack of Familiarity of the Subject Matter

It is much easier to read with understanding if the reader already possesses some prior knowledge of the topic (Gersten et al., 2001; Kemple et al., 2008). The students who stated that they have difficulties in reading comprehension because of lack of familiarity with the subject matter listed as follows:

According to me, the factors causing reading comprehension difficulties is the lack of familiarity of the subject matter (AP, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

The topic is sometimes not familiar for me, so I'm harder to comprehend the content of the text (JS, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

Personally, I think that it can be difficult to comprehend a text if the topic is not familiar for the readers (MM, Google form, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

The students admitted that they usually have difficulties in comprehending text because of the lack of familiarity of subject matter. Using the school textbook as the medium for first introducing new information to students is not usually the most effective method of delivery. It is better for teacher to provide information first by other terms such as video, posters, mini-lecture,

or discussion to build firm background knowledge before students are expected to read about that theme in printed texts.

Briefly, the teacher should be able to provide other sources of texts which will be delivered to the students so that the students have spread knowledge of any topics beside the text in their textbook. It helps the students in further test which have possibilities containing the text which its topic out of their textbook to have prior knowledge and it will make them comprehend the text easily.

Difficulty Level of the Text (Readability)

Text that is complex in terms of concepts, vocabulary, sentence length and structure is difficult for readers to process and it can be a factor influencing the reading comprehension ability.

Sometimes I find texts which are beyond of my capability, and I think the level of a text cause my failure in comprehending texts (DN, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

There was one student stated that she usually found difficulties in comprehending text because of the high level of the text or readability. There is possibility that the text consists of complex terms of vocabulary, structure, or any else which are not suitable with the students' grade level. It would be better if the text writer organized compatible text level with the students' grade level.

Inadequate Use of Reading Strategies

The use of strategy in reading could help the students in visualizing, making connections, reflecting, and summarize the text they read (Kemple et al., 2008; McKown & Barnett, 2007; Sencibaugh, 2007).

The factor causing difficulties in comprehending English texts is do not use strategy in reading (DM, WhatsApp. Researcher's translation).

It is important for the students to use a strategy in reading any texts. Yet, there are many students read the text without any strategy which caused difficulties in comprehending the texts.

Problems in Recalling Information after Reading.

Recall is strongest when readers connect new information in the text to their previous knowledge and experience, (Chan & Dally, 2002; Myers & Botting, 2008; Sencibaugh, 2007).

I have disability in connecting my prior knowledge with the new information of the text (DN, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

I often have problems with my previous knowledge with the new knowledge in a text. Perhaps it can be the factor causes my difficulties (VS, WhatsApp, 3 October 2020, Researcher's translation).

The context of the problems in recalling information after reading has a similarity with the students who are not familiar with the subject matter. These two factors related to previous or prior knowledge of the students concerned with the topic of the text they read. The differ is that familiarity of the text related to the existence of students' prior knowledge, while recalling information related to the students' disability to connect the information of the text they read with their own previous knowledge and experience. It needs practices in the students' daily learning, so, when the students have a test in any time, they would not have problems in recalling information.

The data presented above as reported by the students are the factors causing or influencing the students' difficulties in comprehending English texts. Westwood stated that there are eight causes of reading comprehension difficulties. Two of them are not reported as the factors affecting their difficulties. They are listed as follows:

Weak Verbal Reasoning

The ability to understand text, and particularly to go beyond the words on the page in order to make relevant connections among facts and to critique the ideas, reflects the operation of verbal reasoning (Cain & Oakhill, 2006; Hummel, 2000).

From the data gathered, there was no student admitted that weak verbal reasoning is one of the factors causing the reading comprehension difficulties.

Problems with Processing Information

In order to maintain the meaning of text as the sentences and paragraphs accumulate, a reader has to be able to keep relevant information within working memory and make necessary connections between ideas (Cohen- Mimran & Sapir, 2007; Savage et al., 2007; Swanson & Jerman, 2007). Limited working memory is sometimes suggested as a causal factor in poor comprehension. Both data of Google form and WhatsApp do not show that problems with processing information is one of the factors influencing difficulties in reading comprehension.

CONCLUSION

Reading is an important skill that learners need to master in learning any language. This paper reveals that the reading comprehension difficulties faced by the 22 tenth grade students include all the theory of Nuttall except detail information, they are determining main idea, locating reference, understanding vocabulary, and making inference.” However, most of them have difficulties in determining main idea and making inference.

According to the students, the factors influencing their reading comprehension were limited vocabulary knowledge, lack of fluency, lack of familiarity of the subject matter, and the problems in recalling after reading. In other words, the factors influence students’ reading comprehension which elaborated by Westwood (2008) were found in the 22 students, except weak verbal reasoning and problems in processing information.

It is recommended that future research employs a qualitative approach to observe students in classrooms in Medan and observe how reading lessons are conducted by the teachers. The result of this research is expected to be useful for both teacher and students in order to improving students’ reading comprehension ability.

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