



An Analysis of Students' Reading Comprehension Difficulties during Covid-19 Pandemic with Online Classes in Junior High School

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Abstract

This study aimed at finding out the junior high school students' difficulties in reading and students' attempts to overcome their reading difficulties during the covid-19 pandemic. This study used a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. The research participant took from six students in junior high school in Karawang with different levels from high, middle, and high levels, each level took from two students. The data on students' reading comprehension difficulties were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results show that students' reading comprehension difficulties were affected by internal factors and external factors. and the use of the internet became the media for students' attempts to deal with reading difficulties.

Keywords:

EFL, reading comprehension, reading difficulties

INTRODUCTION

Pandemic Covid-19 is like the sword of Damocles hanging over the lives of people across the world and it has affected every sector of life in the worst manner including the education sector. Calamitous repercussions of covid-19 on the educational system have set unprecedented challenges because of massive school closure. However, effective online learning has proved to be beneficial to some extent but even then students have faced serious difficulties in comprehending texts and embracing online learning.

Irrespectively of the speakers' backgrounds, English has been used as a means of communication on a global scale. As a result, English proficiency has become a highly valued skill in society. Four basic skills in English must be mastered by the students through the learning process. All of the basic English skills are equally essential to assist students' English mastery. These abilities include listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Reading, on the other hand, has always been regarded as a fundamental skill that could aid students in mastering other skills (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Pardede (2019) posited that reading is the most vital skill every English as a foreign language (EFL) learner must master because: (1) since they learn English in an environment where English is not used in daily life they lack inputs from their daily interaction and reading could overcome it best; (2) reading significantly contribute to one's personal and intellectual development, further studies, career development, and the capability to meet changes; and (3) reading skills develop a learner's mastery of other language learning areas.

Reading comprehension is not merely a process of recognizing and understanding words and their meanings. It involves a more complex cognitive process where students could understand the meaning of written language, link it to their prior knowledge, and build up a mental representation of the information that they have read (Keenan, et al., 2008; Takaloo & Ahmadi, 2017). Pardede (2019) accentuated that recent theories of reading emphasize “reading comprehension as an interactive process involving features of the reader, the texts, and tasks” (p. 79). Thus, reading comprehension refers to a reader's capability to understand and interpret written language through the interactional process of relating new and incoming information to information already actively and constructively stored in memory (Leslie, 1993; Tierney & Pearson, 1994).

Since English is taught as a foreign language in Indonesia, students are more likely to struggle with reading comprehension. Students are also not exposed to the language regularly, making it more difficult for them to master it in a short period and leading to limited vocabulary. Hidayati (2018) said a student who has low reading ability will find difficulty in the learning process in consequence reading is a vital skill that aids students in mastering other skills.

Some researchers have conducted research related to reading comprehension difficulties. Saraswati (2021) conducted a study about students' reading comprehension difficulties collected through reading comprehension tests for eighth-grade students and reveal the main problem of reading that is often faced by students whose first language is not English. These problems include difficulty in comprehending reading text. Students are also not regularly exposed to the language. Qarqez (2017) carried out a study on the difficulties faced by secondary school EFL learners in their reading comprehension. The results showed that they encountered ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited available time to cognitively process the text. Riadil (2020) investigated the factors of reading comprehension factors and the strategies used by EFL learners in reading comprehension. Li (2021) examined the sources of reading comprehension difficulties in English language learners (ELLs). The results showed that ELL poor comprehenders scored lower than EL1 poor comprehenders on vocabulary breadth, listening comprehension, and morphological awareness, but the two groups did not differ on higher-level skills. Theoretical and educational implications for the identification and instruction of ELL poor comprehenders are discussed. Finally, Hall

(2019) focused on the inference instruction for middle grades students with below-average reading comprehension by determining the relative effects of a small group.

Inspired by those previous studies this research was conducted to find out students' difficulties in reading and their attempts to overcome reading difficulties during the covid-19 pandemic.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative method, aiming to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem, with a descriptive approach. Thus this study is descriptive qualitative research carried out to provide a systematic and accurate description of the problems faced by junior high school students in reading.

Participants

This study involved an English teacher and six junior high school students in Karawang, Indonesia, having different reading abilities, i.e., low, middle, and high. To collect the data, they were observed during attending their English classes and interviewed as soon as the classes were over.

Data Collection and Instruments

In this study, the data was collected through observations, interviews, and documentation. The first step is observation. Data collection began with observations followed by interviews and documentation. The observations were carried out by observing the English teacher and the six students while they were doing the learning activities in the classroom and taking notes. When the classes were over, further data was gathered through interviews. Thus, the instrument employed in this study included observation sheets, interview guidelines, and documentation. The collected data were analyzed using the descriptive analysis technique.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Based on the observations and interviews two main points were noted: teacher activities and students' activities.

Teacher's Activities

When the teacher entered the classroom, she greeted the students in English, takes attendance, and refreshed the material they studied in the previous meeting. Based on the observations, it was found that the teacher did not always motivate the students. She rarely motivated the students at the beginning of a class. She sometimes provided motivation only during the learning session when she encountered a problem related to the material or when the students found difficulties during the learning sessions. She communicated with the students in two languages: Indonesian and English. She did this because she thought the students would not understand the material being learned if she used full English. Additionally, she delivered the material using the lecture method, which conveyed learning materials directly through oral speech or verbal communication.

Based on the observations of the English learning process in the classes studied, the teacher only used guidebooks in the form of worksheets which were sometimes

accompanied by a dictionary. During the classes, the teachers seemed too focused on the worksheets and dictionary that she forgot to manage the class well. The classes were dominated by a quiet atmosphere. As a result, the classes were monotonous, which emerged boredom among the students. And they became less interested in learning.

The teacher closed each class by reviewing the material that had just been discussed, and then she conveyed the material to learn at the next meeting. Sometimes, at the end of a class, the teacher also motivated students before giving assignments.

Students' Activities

The observation and interviews with the students were focused on obtaining data related to their reading comprehension difficulties. Based on the information obtained, several factors that affect students' learning difficulties in English were identified. The factors are classified into two categories: external and internal factors. External factors include things that affect students from outside. The most influential factors identified from the interviews were their lack of motivation in learning English and too frequent use of cell phones. This can be seen from the finding that none of the six students reply "Yes" to the question, "*Apakah kamu merasa disemangati oleh motivasi yang diberikan oleh guru*" ("Do you feel encouraged by the motivation given by the teacher?").

In the followings, the researcher describes the results of interviews with junior high school students about the things that hinder the difficulty in understanding reading English, especially related to the external factors,

Most of the obstacles here were the lack of motivation or lack of interest of students so students were less interested in learning English at school. A student's high interest or interest in learning English could make it easier for them to understand the lesson. Rosalina (2018) said that interest is a persistent tendency to pay attention to and remember some activities. Great interest could affect learning, if the subjects are not interested in the students, the students will not be able to study well, because there is no attraction for them. Without interest, students will feel reluctant to learn, but if students are interested in English lessons, English lessons can be easily understood.

Two of the students who were asked about their view of English learning they were attending responded that learning English at school is difficult to understand. Such a view, of course, can demotivate learning English. According to them, they felt they were not enthusiastic to learn. Their eagerness to read texts in English was also low. The question that researcher asked was, "*Bagaimana menurut kamu tentang pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris di sekolah?*" ("What do you think about learning English at school?"). They answered:

R1: "*sulit dipelajari*" (hard to learn)

R2: "*sulit dipahami*" (hard to understand)

However, the other four students said learning English at school was quite interesting.

R3: "*Menarik*" (interesting)

R4: "*Menarik*" (interesting)

R5: "*Menarik*" (interesting)

R6: "*Menarik*" (interesting)

The internal factors include psychological conditions within students. Two major factors were identified: laziness and difficulty in understanding English sentences,

Laziness is a psychological condition that can be triggered by many things, but most of them still have a correlation with the problems discussed previously, namely motivation. Laziness is a mental condition experienced by students that makes them apathetic to participate in learning. The students who claimed to have this problem were the two who had low ability in English. They said that they never learned English outside of school.

Difficulty in understanding English sentences naturally causes students to be unenthusiastic to read. Based on the interviews, it was found that the students encountered difficulty to understand English sentences due to poor mastery of grammar, difficulty in understanding grammar, strain in comprehending long sentences, and lack of reading strategy. To the question “*Apa saja kesulitan yang kamu alami saat mempelajari Bahasa Inggris?*” (“What are the difficulties that you experience while learning English”) the students replied:

R1: “*artinya susah dipahami*” (the meaning hard to understand)

R2: “*susah dipahami*” (hard to understand)

R3: “*kata-katanya ada yang belum paham*” (there are words that do not understand)

R4: “*cara bacanya*” (way to read)

R5: “*kata-katanya belum paham*” (words that do not understand)

R6: “*kata-katanya belum paham*” (words that do not understand)

The Teacher’s Efforts to Solve Reading Difficulties

Through the direct observations and interviews, the teacher’s efforts to solve the problem of difficulty reading English texts are providing detailed explanations through the lecture method plus question and answer, giving assignments, and reminding the students that they have already got facilities to support them to master English. For instance, there are various applications on mobile phones such as google translate, my dictionary, as well as YouTube they can use individually. Another effort made by the teacher was to approach students, found out if there were obstacles faced by the students, then provided help to solve the problem.

Students’ Attempts to Solve Reading Difficulties

The results of direct interviews conducted by the researcher with the students revealed that several attempts were made to overcome difficulties in reading English texts. For instance, if they met a vocabulary whose meaning or pronunciation was unfamiliar, they searched Google or consulted the teacher to find out. To the question “*Bagaimana usaha yang anda lakukan untuk bisa mengetahui cara membaca Bahasa Inggris dalam pengucapan yang benar?*” (“How do you try to find out how to read English in correct pronunciation?”). the students answered:

R1: “*Mencari tahu melalui google*” (searching on google)

R2: “*Mencari tahu di internet*” (searching through the internet)

R3: “*Bertanya ke guru*” (ask to the teaching)

R4: “*Bertanya ke guru*” (ask to the teaching)

R5: “*Mencari di google*” (searching on google)

R6: “*Bertanya ke guru*” (ask to the teaching)

The efforts aimed at overcoming the difficulties of students in reading English texts, essentially have not completely overcome the existing problems because there are still many students who do not understand English well.

DISCUSSION

Students' Reading Comprehension Difficulties

Based on the data, the reading comprehension difficulties that happened to students were due to two main factors, i.e. internal and external factors. Students' lack of motivation was one of the internal factors that affected their reading difficulties. The students' low motivation can be caused by the teacher's poor teaching method. Another factor that caused the students' reading comprehension difficulties was external factors which include laziness in reading and difficulty to read sentences in English. This confirms Saraswati's (2021) study revealing that since English is taught as a foreign language in Indonesia, students have the possibility of facing difficulties in comprehending reading text. Students are also not regularly exposed to the language, which makes it harder for them to master it in a short period and further leads them to have a limited vocabulary. Moreover, when it comes to their reading motivation, the students' reading motivation in Indonesia can be considered low. This is proven by a survey conducted by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2018 that was released in 2019. The survey shows that Indonesian students' reading ability is considered very low since it sits in the 72nd position out of 77 surveyed countries.

Students' Attempts to Solve Reading Difficulties

The researcher found that in facing reading difficulties such as lacking vocabulary, the students tried to find the meaning through the internet. Lack of vocabulary meaning can affect students' reading difficulties. This supports the study of Hidayati (2018) showing the reading difficulty faced by students happened because students have poor mastery of grammar, difficulty in understanding vocabulary, strain in understanding long sentences, lack of media learning, less support from the family, and lack of reading strategy, so lack of vocabulary meaning can affect students reading difficulties.

CONCLUSIONS

Low motivation and lack of vocabulary were the sources of students' reading comprehension difficulties. The students' motivation was the issues that arise from themselves and from the teacher who did not give them an interesting way of teaching, especially in the reading section.

Various methods can be used to learn English during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly through the internet; this method was one of the attempts used by participants to deal with reading comprehension difficulties.

This study has an obvious limitation, i.e. it involved only participants from a single school. Thus, to get more comprehensive results, further studies were recommended to involve more participants from different schools.

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