



Difficult Aspects of Reading Comprehension Faced by Non-English Department of Vocational Students

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ABSTRACT

Understanding and interpreting text is a fundamental skill for students across disciplines, not limited to those in the English Department. Proficiency in reading comprehension not only enhances vocabulary and writing abilities but also fosters overall academic growth. This research endeavors to pinpoint the primary challenges encountered by first-semester students at Politeknik Negeri Banjarmasin in comprehending written material. Employing a descriptive quantitative approach, the study aims to identify the most daunting aspects of reading comprehension. A reading comprehension assessment comprising 40 multiple-choice questions, administered via Google Form, was utilized to gather data. Analysis revealed that students encounter significant hurdles in this domain. Across all question types, spanning the five facets of reading comprehension, difficulty levels were consistently high. Particularly, questions assessing the determination of the main idea posed the greatest challenge, with 60% of students struggling in this area, followed by making inferences (44%), locating references (41%), understanding vocabulary (36%), and grasping detailed information (34%). Notably, identifying the main idea emerged as the most formidable task, whereas discerning detailed information proved relatively less challenging. These findings serve to highlight areas for improvement in understanding main ideas and inform strategies aimed at enhancing comprehension skills.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Reading Comprehension Aspects



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

English has evolved into a global language, uniting people from diverse backgrounds 1. Proficiency in English is now highly valued due to its widespread use and significant role in international academic settings (Saraswati et al., 2021). Recognizing this, the Indonesian

government incorporated English into the curriculum from kindergarten through university level, aiming to develop essential language skills, including speaking, writing, listening, and reading (Saraswati et al., 2021). One crucial skill needed in university level as the highest level in educational field is reading. Unfortunately, students in Indonesia are more likely to struggle with comprehension when reading material because English is taught as a foreign language (Lestari et al., 2017). Additionally, students are not exposed to the language on a daily basis, which hinders their ability to learn it quickly and contributes to their restricted vocabulary. Furthermore, it is possible to conclude that Indonesian students have low reading motivation (Masyhur, 2016).

Reading, a cornerstone of English skills, is crucial for overall language proficiency and societal readiness as well as a means to read more sources written by many authors worldwide (Saraswati et al., 2021). The primary goal of reading is to extract information and ideas from the material. Reading comprehension is vital for understanding and obtaining information, whether for pleasure or knowledge enhancement (Anaktototy & Lesnussa, 2022; Gunobgunob-Mirasol, 2019; Jose & Raja, 2011). High school education aims to equip students with reading comprehension skills, a necessity for reaching intermediate and advanced English levels. However, upon entering college, students often face tests like TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) in the case of vocational higher institutions, where reading comprehension plays a crucial role (Powers et al., 2008). A preliminary study through interview to the English lecturer of Politeknik Negeri Banjarmasin revealed a result that the freshmen are required to take TOEIC as one of the entrance tests. Then, on the third (D3) or fifth (D4) semesters, certain students need TOEIC to register the Indonesian International Students Mobility Awards for vocational studenys (IISMAVO) as a program to intern abroad. Finally, on their last semester upon the completion of study, the students must take TOEIC as one of the requirements to take their certificate of accomplishment. Therefore, the existence of reading skill in TOEIC is important to students.

Several studies, including (Aini, 2023; Hoang et al., 2021; Ha, 2015; Hidayati, 2018; Zuhra, 2015), highlighted persistent difficulties in reading comprehension faced by students in high school and university students. Challenges in reading skills include vocabulary, understanding main ideas, making inferences, and answering detailed questions. These difficulties stem from various factors such as inadequate reading strategies, weak vocabulary, and unfamiliarity with different question types.

Aini's (2023) research underscored the prevalence of difficulties, with students struggling in areas like understanding the main idea, vocabulary, making inferences, and inferring the

meaning of specific words. Hidayati's study (2018) at SMAN 1 Darussalam, Aceh Besar, revealed challenges in answering main idea, inference, and reference questions, often attributed to poor vocabulary, grammar mastery, and lack of media learning. Collectively, these studies emphasize the commonality of challenges faced by students in reading comprehension. These difficulties result in low English proficiency levels, falling short of the intermediate standard.

In understanding reading comprehension, it is crucial to recognize it as a complex process requiring the organization of various cognitive skills and abilities (Hidayati, 2018). According to (Aini, 2023), reading comprehension is the process of extracting meaning from text based on the reader's existing knowledge. There are five essential aspects of reading comprehension: determining the main idea, locating references, understanding vocabulary, making inferences, and grasping detailed information (Hidayati, 2018). These aspects underscore the multifaceted nature of reading comprehension and the skills required for successful text comprehension. While many studies focused on unraveling English Department students' difficulties in reading comprehension, this study focuses on vocational higher education students' difficulties in reading comprehension. Even though English is not the students' major. They are given two semesters of English courses during their study and provided TOEIC at the beginning (first semester) and the last (sixth semester) as the exit test. Reading is one of the skills given in TOEIC. Thus, reading is indeed needed for them. The researchers chose to conduct this test on students at Politeknik Negeri Banjarmasin because of the concern provided given by Politeknik Negeri Banjarmasin to equip students to prepare TOEIC. While previous studies such as Aini (2023); Hoang et al., (2021); Ha (2015); Hidayati (2018); Zuhra (2015), focused on high schools and university, this research is done in vocational college whose students are coming from non-English Departments. By conducting this research, it is hoped that it can find out the level of students' reading comprehension abilities and can find out where students' difficulties are in terms of reading comprehension, so the lecturers can prepare and determine the right strategy to improve students' reading comprehension.

1.2. Research questions

Based on the above, the research question of this study is what are the most difficult aspects of reading comprehension that are encountered by the first students of Politeknik Negeri Banjarmasin?

1.3. Significance of the study

1. For others researchers

This research is expected to serve as a valuable reference for other researchers who want to conduct research in the same or similar area.

2. For English lecturers

This research will enable the English lecturers in vocational institutions to construct and find creative techniques and teaching activities for teaching reading to help students solve their problems in comprehending English texts.

3. For students

This research will be useful to improve the students' activity in reading class and to help students solve problems in reading tests such as the ones found in TOEIC.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employed descriptive study, and the approach is qualitative. The researchers tried to describe phenomena (Borg, W. & Gall, 2003; Sutton & Austin, 2015) on the non-English Department students' difficulty through their answer of reading comprehension questions in multiple choice form. Through this descriptive study, the researchers examined the most problem that students face in reading comprehension by looking at the percentage of incorrect answers on every reading comprehension aspect of the test.

2.2. Samples/Participants

The research setting of this study was at Politeknik Negeri Banjarmasin, Indonesia. In this study the population is all freshmen students of Politeknik Negeri Banjarmasin and the participants are the students who were voluntarily answered the provided test. The total number of the subject in this study was 59 students. The researchers decided to choose the first semester student of Politeknik Negeri Banjarmasin because the results of this study would be very beneficial for them through the English lecturers. The lecturer can obtain where their students are lacking in reading comprehension, and they have more time to help improve the students' ability of get the TOEFL/TOEIC scores that they need if the students want to get the scholarship to study aboard or work later on.

2.3. Instruments

The researchers used a reading comprehension was adapted from research conducted by Hidayati (2018), and this test delivered through Google Form. The researchers conducted a reading test for the students to assess their reading comprehension. The researcher attempted to determine whether or not the students could answer the reading test correctly by taking this test.

The students' correct and incorrect answers were used to determine whether students have difficulty or not. The researchers chose to use multiple choice because multiple choice is a good test tool in terms of objectivity and reliability. The use of multiple-choice can also make it easier to see which students are successful and which are not. The researchers conducted a test consisting of forty multiple-choice questions with five aspects of reading comprehension as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Aspects of Reading Comprehension in this Study

No.	Reading Comprehension Aspect	Items
1	Deciding the main idea	8
2	Making inferences	8
3	Locating references	8
4	Detail Information	8
5	Understanding Vocabulary	8
Total		40

2.4. Data analysis

To collect data, the researchers used the reading comprehension test instrument. After the students answered the questions provided, then the researchers analyzed it by counting how many questions they could answer, and gave a score, this was done to see how difficult the reading comprehension test was for the students. Then, the researchers again counted how many students were wrong in answering the questions one by one, this aims to see which questions were difficult for students. To find which types of questions were difficult for students, the researchers categorized the questions based on their types, namely, questions about main idea, reference, conclusion, vocabulary, and detailed information and calculated the percentage of difficulty level of each type.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

The findings of this study focus to unveil the most difficult aspect of reading comprehension faced by the students in reading comprehension questions. There are 36 students who participated in this study. The average score obtained is 57,5. Figure 2 presents the frequency of the students' correct answer and score in reading comprehension test.

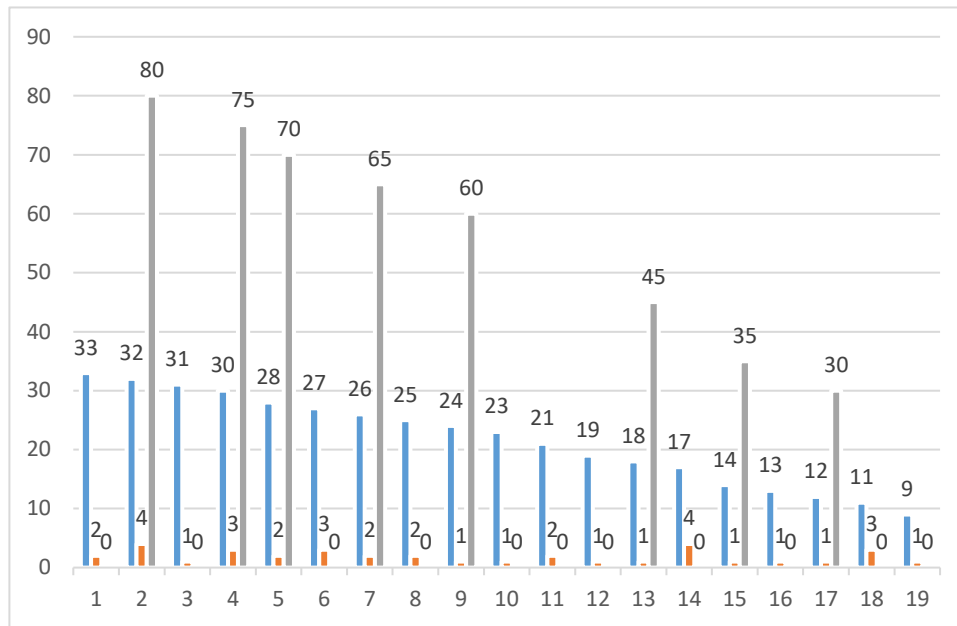


Figure 1. Frequency of Students' Responses in the Test

Information:

Blue line: correct answer

Red line: Frequency (number of students)

Green line: Students' score

Results of Each Aspect

There are eight questions for determining the main idea question in the test. To be precise, the detail of the percentage of difficulty per question item is given in Table 4.

Table 4. The Results in Answering Main idea Questions

No.	Question item	Incorrect answer	Difficulty percentage per question item	The percentage of reading for main idea difficulty
1.	6	33	92%	
2.	9	28	78%	
3.	11	16	44%	
4.	14	33	92%	60%
5.	27	23	64%	
6.	28	12	33%	
7.	29	16	44%	
8.	31	11	30,5%	

This column shows the percentage of reading for main idea difficulty. It indicates the proportion of incorrect answers specifically related to understanding the main idea of the reading. The average difficulty of the main idea question type resulted 60% difficulty level.

There are eight questions for locating reference.

Table 5. The Results in Answering Locating Reference Questions

No.	Question item	Incorrect answer	Difficulty percentage per question item	Percentage of reading for locating reference difficulty
1.	4	13	36%	
2.	8	11	30,5%	
3.	13	29	80,5%	
4.	15	17	47%	41%
5.	23	10	28%	
6.	26	10	28%	
7.	34	17	47%	
8.	40	10	28%	

From Table 5, it can be seen that the question about locating reference falls into the fair category (41%).

Table 6. Results in Answering Vocabulary Questions

No.	Question item	Incorrect answer	Difficulty percentage per question item	The percentage of reading for vocabulary difficulty
1.	2	12	33%	
2.	7	17	47%	
3.	18	7	19%	
4.	20	20	55,5%	36%
5.	21	13	36%	
6.	24	5	14%	
7.	31	11	30,5%	
8.	38	18	50%	

From Table 6, we can see that the vocabulary question was the easier question for students to answer correctly (36%). The table demonstrates variations in the difficulty levels of different question items. For example, Question Items 7, 20, 21, and 38 had higher percentages of difficulty compared to others.

Table 7. Results in Answering Making Inference Questions

No.	Question item	Incorrect answer	Difficulty percentage per question item	The percentage of reading for making inference difficulty
1.	1	13	36%	
2.	5	35	97%	
3.	16	17	47%	
4.	19	24	67%	44%
5.	25	6	17%	

6.	30	13	36%
7.	37	13	36%
8.	39	7	19%

Table 7 demonstrates variations in the difficulty levels of different question items in answering inference question type. For example, Question item numbers 5, 16, and 19 had higher percentages of difficulty compared to others. The students can answer questions about making inference as much as 44%, this aspect categorize as fair questions.

There are only a few numbers that may be difficult for students to answer correctly such as questions number 5, 16, and 19. Question number 5 is the most difficult making inference question for students. There were 35 students (97%) who could not answer this question correctly, and there was only 1 person who could answer it correctly. This question categorized as difficult question. For question 16, there are 17 students (47%) or almost half of the participating students could not answer this question correctly. Furthermore, question number 19 had 24 students (67%) out of 36 students unable to answer this question correctly. Because of that, question number 16 and 19 categorized as fair question.

Table 8. Results in Answering Detail Information Questions

No.	Question item	Incorrect answer	Difficulty percentage per question item	The percentage of reading for detail information difficulty
1.	3	10	28%	
2.	10	10	28%	
3.	12	29	80,5%	
4.	17	4	11%	34%
5.	22	8	22%	
6.	32	10	28%	
7.	33	13	36%	
8.	35	15	42%	

Table 8 shows that questions regarding detailed information are categorized into the fair category (34%). From the table, it's evident that some question items have varying levels of difficulty. For instance, Question Item 13 had a significantly higher difficulty percentage of 80.5%, suggesting that it was notably challenging for respondents. Conversely, Question Items 8, 23, 26, and 40 all had a relatively lower difficulty percentage of 28%, indicating that they were less challenging compared to other items.

3.2. Discussion

Determining Main Idea

The findings indicate that questions concerning identifying the main idea pose the greatest challenge for students. All of the items related to determining the main idea are classified as fair questions. Students continue to struggle with accurately answering questions about identifying the main idea, with a success rate of only 40%. This places it within the fair category. Questions 6 and 14 emerge as particularly challenging for students in grasping the main idea, with 33 students (92%) unable to provide correct answers, rendering these questions classified as difficult. The results underscore variations in difficulty percentages across different question items. From the results, it's evident that some question items have higher difficulty percentages compared to others. Additionally, the percentage of reading for main idea difficulty provides insights into specific areas where participants struggled the most in understanding the main idea of the reading material.

Every student may find it challenging or confusing to identify the main idea in a reading text (Fawahid et al., 2023; Mustafa & Bakri, 2020), and occasionally they may not be able to pinpoint the main idea's location. The primary concept of the paragraph is a unique aptitude or competency that is critical for comprehension of written language or literature. The main idea, or more specifically, the message the author want to get over to the reader, is what makes up a paragraph. As a result, the main idea is the most significant notion that the author explores in a paragraph. The results of this study can be used to identify areas of weakness in understanding main ideas and guide efforts to improve comprehension skills (Arrumaisa et al., 2019; Aziza et al., 2019). For instance, focusing on strategies to better comprehend the main idea of passages could help reduce the percentage of incorrect answers for similar question items in the future.

Locating Reference

The question about locating reference falls into the fair category (41%). Question number 13 was difficult for the students to answer correctly. There were 29 students (80,5%) who could not answer this question correctly, this means that this question is included in the category of difficult questions for students. In identifying references, 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 (Fawahid et al., 2023; Syahrizal et al., 2020). The results of this study in the locating reference offer valuable insights into areas of weakness in understanding main ideas and guide efforts to enhance comprehension skills. Specifically, focusing on strategies to

improve understanding of main ideas could help reduce the percentage of incorrect answers for question items with high percentages of reading for main idea difficulty.

Understanding Vocabulary

The vocabulary question was the easier question for students to answer correctly (36%), even so, this type of problem is still included in the fair difficulty level. Most students could answer this vocabulary question easily. Only a few numbers might be a little difficult for the students. In English as a foreign language, it is possible that students expand their vocabulary knowledge while reading a passage, such as by finding out new words meaning in the dictionary and guessing the meaning from the context (Ahmed, 2016; Gunobgunob-Mirasol, 2019). Students would find help to understand the meaning of difficult words. However, the strategies when working on a test is different. Students might use context to guess the meaning of the difficult words.

The percentage of reading for vocabulary difficulty provides insights into the extent to which vocabulary comprehension influenced incorrect answers. For instance, Question Items 2, 4, and 5 had relatively higher percentages of reading for vocabulary difficulty, indicating that understanding the vocabulary used in the questions or reading material was a significant factor contributing to incorrect answers.

Reasons for these difficult in answering vocabulary questions could include unfamiliarity with specific vocabulary terms, lack of contextual understanding of vocabulary usage within the reading material, or insufficient vocabulary development among the respondents (Ahmed, 2016; Gunobgunob-Mirasol, 2019; Jirousova, 2015; O'Reilly & Marsden, 2021). Additionally, the structure and wording of the questions could have contributed to confusion or misinterpretation. To address these results, interventions such as vocabulary building exercises, contextual vocabulary learning strategies, and clarification of question wording could be implemented. These interventions aim to enhance vocabulary comprehension and overall reading comprehension skills, thereby reducing the percentage of incorrect answers.

Making Inference

Some students still cannot answer questions about making inference (44%), this aspect categorize as fair questions. Question number 5 is the most difficult making inference question for students. There were 35 students (97%) who could not answer this question correctly, and there was only 1 person who could answer it correctly. This question categorized as difficult question.

Some questions on this question type are:

“From the passage, we can conclude that...”,

“It can be inferred from the passage...”,

“What is the meaning of the statement above?”.

Reasons for these results could include ambiguity or implicitness in the information provided in the reading material, complexity in connecting different pieces of information to draw inferences, or insufficient inference-making skills among the respondents. d. Possible Interventions: To address these results, interventions such as explicit instruction in inference-making strategies, practice activities focused on inference-making from texts, and providing clearer contextual cues within the reading material could be implemented. These interventions aim to enhance inference-making abilities and overall reading comprehension skills, thereby reducing the percentage of incorrect answers.

Detailed Information

Among the five aspects of reading comprehension, inquiries concerning specific details pose the least difficulty for students. Out of the eight questions pertaining to detailed information, only one proved notably challenging for the students. Specifically, in question number 12, a considerable majority of students, 29 out of 36 (80.5%), provided incorrect answers. Queries related to detailed information fall within the "fair" category, constituting 34% of the total questions. Nevertheless, among the five aspects of reading comprehension, questions regarding details remain the most straightforward for students to tackle.

Students must search for specific information by looking for concepts or specific details in a reading text. As a result, while trying to locate specific information in a reading text, students occasionally struggle to discern between relevant and irrelevant information (Yuvirawan et al., 2021). Students may use the scanning technique to identify and answer detailed questions. Readers can locate information by scanning without having to read the complete text. This scan's objective is to enable the reader to swiftly navigate through a large amount of content in order to locate certain facts and information. Students' comprehension of the content directly contained in the reading text is assessed by the questions listed in the text (Aziza et al., 2019; Syahrizal et al., 2020).

Moreover, when seeking answers to specific inquiries, readers can enhance their comprehension by identifying key terms within the question and searching for synonymous

terms within the passage. Various components of reading comprehension, including referencing, identifying the main idea, and drawing inferences, are interconnected. Referencing aids in identifying the central concept within a paragraph or sentence, while recognizing the main idea facilitates the process of drawing conclusions from the text. Such strategies significantly contribute to a student's understanding of the reading material.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1. Conclusions

All types of questions based on the five aspects of reading comprehension based on the difficulty index, all fall into questions that have a fair difficulty level. From the results obtained, students who had difficulty in answering questions of the type determining the main idea (60%), making inference (44%), locating reference (41%), vocabulary (36%), and detailed information (34%). Determining the main idea was the most difficult type of question they faced (60%), while finding detailed information was the easiest type of question for them. Although all questions on the five aspects of reading comprehension only fall into the fair category and not into the difficult category.

Based on the data above, this indicates that students still have not mastered fully and still find it difficult in answering the reading comprehension questions. It can be seen from all types of questions that fall into the medium difficulty level, especially questions about the main idea. The students faced varying degrees of difficulty across different types of reading comprehension questions due to their limited knowledge in English as they are from non English Departments. Overall, while there were variations in difficulty across different question types, none of them were categorized as difficult to students.

4.2. Suggestions

In order to improve students' ability in reading comprehension, the English lecturers can teach students about scanning and skimming techniques, and provide continuous reading materials in English 1, English 2, and TOEIC preparation. All these exposures of English learning provided by Politeknik Negeri Ba njarmasin are good decisions to do. This present research serves as an evaluation expected to analyze the strengths and weaknesses in reading comprehension. It is suggested that the English lecturers give students regular tests to accustom students in reading comprehension questions and strategies as well as monitor their development of the students' reading comprehension skills.

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