

# AN INVESTIGATION ON ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS IN INDONESIAN CULTURAL CONTEXTS

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**Abstract:** One of the keys to improve literacies in various fields in this globalizing world is English reading comprehension skills since English has been used dominantly in international contexts. In this respect, unavoidably, Indonesian people must possess the English reading comprehension skills in order to get in touch with current global development. However, at present Indonesians still face problems in English reading comprehension skills. This paper aims to investigate the problems faces by Indonesians in their activities to comprehend English texts. This investigation is paramount since by conducting clear identification on these issues the authoritative and responsible parties may use the findings to underpin their endeavours to find better and more accurate solutions to the problems. Using literary studies as the research methodology in writing this paper, the writer reveals that existing reading comprehension problems are composed of cultural-based issues, English teaching and learning concerns, and social-contextual problems

**Keywords:** Reading skills, reading comprehension, reading comprehension problems

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The basic literacy skill that one must possess is reading skills because the concepts of literacy primarily refer to the capabilities to absorb information and knowledge through reading activities and proficiencies to communicate the obtained information via written media. At hand, associating literacy with reading skills is acceptable.

The reading skill are closely associated with the people's prosperities (Kumar, Kumar, & Rani, 2016). The better the reading skills the communities possess, the better the economic lives they have. The better reading abilities also enable people becoming successful in their academic pursuit (Iftanti, 2015). A current study indicates that the better reading comprehension skills the students possess,

the better the students have in their science and math achievement (Akbaşlı, Şahin, & Yaykiran, 2016). The people with better reading comprehension skills also obtain greater opportunities to brighter career promotion (Wei, Cromwell, & McClarty, 2016; Bhatia & Bremner, 2012). Despite of these important roles of the reading skills, the literacy level of Indonesian people unfortunately is listed among the worst in the world in the level of 60 of 61 countries. (Gunawan, 2016).

Reading skills are one of the main components taught in English language teaching and learning processes in Indonesia. Teachers perform English teaching reading skills in, at least two level: beginning level and reading comprehension level. Beginning level comprises the earlier level of teaching reading where teachers introduces to the students orthographical

writing in the form of separated alphabetical orders. At this point, Teachers commonly teaches students some basic English vocabularies to contextualize the phonemic knowledge of the alphabets.

English reading comprehension level constitutes the higher level of reading skills. Students should be able to use their cognitive skill to comprehend the intertwined conditions between written and spoken communication in which factually these types of communication are different in nature from one to another (Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2015). As mentioned earlier of the significant roles of reading skills, the writer intends to investigate the reading comprehension problems faced by English learners in Indonesia. This study expects to reveal the issues of unique nature of Indonesian students who have grown up in Indonesian cultures develops their reading comprehension skills of another culture-type of reading text.

## **2 METHODS**

The methodology applied in this study is literary studies. The researchers searched the reading comprehension problems of Indonesian students through English journal articles. To gather the journal articles, the researcher searched them through a search engine: google scholar. He only included the articles that explicitly contain the researches that were conducted in Indonesia and deals with English learning, more specifically, about English reading comprehension problems.

The researcher used keywords of “reading comprehension problems in Indonesia” in the search engines, and limit the search in the last five years publication. The articles are then analysed using thematic analyses to explore the existing problems in English reading comprehension problems in Indonesia.

## **3 FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

The analyses of the data from the research articles reveal that the English reading problems that exist in Indonesia consist of three major issues: cultural-based issues, English teaching and learning problems, and social-contextual obstacles.

### **3.1 Cultural based issues in reading comprehension.**

#### **3.1.1 spoken vs written cultures**

Indonesian cultures are more dominant in spoken cultures than in written cultures. To understand oral communication is simpler as the communicators do not requires to decode the meaning through written symbols (Cornoldi & Oakhill, 1996) The oral nature of communication is generally conducted in absence of involvement of written text. Such a culture exposes Indonesian students to face more struggles when learning English reading comprehension skills as they have to overcome overlapping problems of understanding both writing and spoken system of Indonesian language as their first language and the English language as their second language. The complications can be seen when students learn pronunciation. Indonesian and English owns different phonetic classification and symbols (Weda & Sakti, 2017).

#### **3.1.2 Common customs of student-teacher relations**

Teacher are regarded as the knowledgeable. Students, then, are customarily considered rude or impolite to differ from the teachers (Masduqi, 2014) as the students’ knowledge is not comparable yet to their teacher. This culture seems hampering the critical development of students in learning processes as they should follow and obey whatever teachers teach. Otherwise, students are considered disrespectful in the relationship with their teachers (Suryanto, 2014).

### **3.2 English teaching and learning problems**

#### **3.2.1 students’ issues**

Students’ issues deal with their attitude in the learning processes. Firstly, students are passive in the process of learning and

teaching activities (Natsir & Anisati, 2016; Suryanto, 2014). Such an attitude seriously affects the run of the classroom activities and students' learning achievement (Pamuji, 2015). Teachers commonly have to struggle to activate students' learnings that demand more teachers' energy for both motivating students to be active in the activities and ensuring their understanding toward the contents of the lesson (Damayanti, 2017).

Students are lack of reading strategies. To be effective readers, students should be capable of employing some reading strategies like predicting, text mapping, and summarizing (Mistar, Zuhairi, & Yanti, 2016). Fitriasia, Tan, and Yusuf (2015) list other reading strategies that are applicable in order to be effective readers. They include slowing down the reading to better understand the text, focusing on certain text, adjusting the reading speed, pausing and thinking about the text, visualizing the information read, repeat the reading processes, and guessing meaning of unfamiliar words. Students may impose more general reading strategies like making the reading purposes, applying previous knowledge, previewing, evaluating the contents in contrast to the reading objective, skimming the text, skipping unnecessary parts, using contextual hints, stop and thinking, and checking the guessing (Fitriasia, Tan, & Yusuf, 2015, p. 25). Students can use supportive reading strategies as well. They cover taking a note, reading aloud, summarizing text, discussing with other students, underlining or circling, using references, paraphrasing, and keeping asking question about the context of the text (Fitriasia, Tan, & Yusuf, 2015, p. 26). Incorporating the reading strategies in teaching reading should be carried to assist students to be successful readers.

Besides applying less reading strategies, students also own low awareness

of the text genre. Different text genres signify different types of texts. Inability to figure out the genre types is associated with students' reading comprehension skills. The higher the students' awareness on the reading texts, the higher the students' reading comprehension skills are.

The number of students in classroom can be one of the issues that potentially raise problem in learning English reading comprehension. In average, the number of students in a classroom is 40 students (Lie, 2007). This number reduces chances for the students to obtain facilitation for their teachers. Lack of facilitation in their learning can lead to problem in their learning attainment.

Students' English learning achievements are relatively low (Lie, 2007; Hamra & Syatriana, 2010). This is indicated by weakness in interpreting information from reading texts, and they also face difficulties when asked to find meaning using contextual clues (Fitriasia, Tan, & Yusuf, 2015). The low ability of secondary students to comprehend analytical exposition texts become another evidence that their English reading proficiencies are low (Komariah, Ramadhona, & Silviyanti, 2015).

### **3.2.2 Teachers' exemplary**

English Teachers do not provide good examples of using English. This is obvious as they are not active English user in their communities (Lie, 2007). Indonesian people culturally put teachers as knowledgeable people that they refer to. When the people they refer to do not use English, they tend to follow their steps. This learning condition may also become a problem that influences students in learning English reading comprehension skills

### 3.2.3 Teachers ways of teaching

The teaching ways of teaching needs to be more interesting. Muhammad, Muslem, and Sari (2017) argue that teachers still need to improve their teaching by making some improvement in designing more interesting materials. The interesting authentic materials that are developed with rich contextual clues to understand the content facilitate students to have better learning outcome (Astika, 2015). Boring materials discourage students' interest in doing classroom reading activities (Natsir & Anisati, 2016). Therefore, teachers are suggested to use and design more attractive and well-suited material with the nature of the students' contextual learning experiences. In addition, teachers also need to motivate and provide immediate helps to the students who appears to face problems in their learning (Muhammad, Muslem, & Sari, 2017).

Teachers need to handle poor readers. There are still many poor readers in understanding English reading texts (Natsir & Anisati, 2016). In this case, teachers are demanded to set teaching strategies to elevate the students' reading skills (Fitrisia, Tan, & Yusuf, 2015; Mistar, Zuhairi, & Yanti, 2016). Teaching using Think-Pair-Share technique as one of the techniques in cooperative learning, for instance, should be implemented well. Unfortunately, many teachers who teach still have shortage in applying theoretical foundations in their classroom practices. (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006; Lie, 2007)

Another issue in teaching reading is that teachers still lack in providing reading practices (Rochman, 2017). Practice makes perfect. Teachers need to develop fluency in reading skills. Reading fluency refers to the speed of how the student read and how the level of understanding of the students is

toward the reading text they read (Lesgold, et al., 2012). To achieve reading fluency, teachers should provide more practices (Rustipa, 2014). Unfortunately, teachers provide less opportunities for the students to practice. This is most likely due to the limited time allocation in the curriculum.

### 3.2.4-Time allocation for learning reading

Time allocations for reading skill practices are limited. For non-education English education department, the national curriculum just provides two to four credit hours in a week to teach English (Lie, 2007). Similarly, secondary school allocate similar amount of time to teaching English. When teaching English should accommodate for English main skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), this curriculum time allocation raises another issue in English reading comprehension teaching and learning. Adding time allotment for English learning may become a solution to this issues (Rustipa, 2014).

## 3.3 Social-Contextual Obstacles

Social-contextual environments can hamper people to be competent in English reading comprehension skills. Firstly, English is as a Foreign Language in Indonesia (Lie, 2007). This circumstance to some extent discourage students in learning English to be more specific English reading comprehension skills. Students find no problems to understand any information they need in absence of English reading comprehension skills. This contextual condition can be hampering factor for students to learn English to be more specific English reading comprehension skills.

Secondly, students have limited access to any English private course as the cost seem unaffordable for them (Lie, 2007). Lie (2007) stated that to join a private course in

Indonesia students need to pay for USD 20 to USD 100 that is likely not accessible for Indonesian common people whose salary is around USD 100. This social condition certainly has an impact on the students' English learning because of their limited access to learning opportunities.

Thirdly, the use of technology has not been fully available in all regions in Indonesia. Many regions do not have sufficient technological accesses like internet connections. This condition drives the learning processes being conducted in more traditional ways. This tends to force teachers to adopt teacher-centred approach instead of student-centred one.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

Students in Indonesia still face many barriers culturally in order to gain good reading comprehension skills. Culturally, students should face the culture that older know better in their relations with their teachers. In addition, spoken culture that is more dominant in society seems becoming a determining factor on the students' low habit in reading.

Students in Indonesia have also to handle issues related to their teaching and learning processes. In terms of the student themselves, they are relative passive in learning, has practiced inadequate reading strategies, and achieve low attainment in English learning. Students' problems are intensified in their daily life since their English teachers cannot be used a role model in using and practicing English in the community. Moreover, a number of teachers still need improvement in both theoretical perspectives and practical teaching practices that inform one to another.

Time allotment in learning English poses another issue. The limited time for learning and practice can affect to the result of students' mastery in reading ability. In

addition to time allotment, students have to overtake unsupportive environment where English is as a foreign language. Consequently, students find difficulty to practice their English in the community including English reading comprehension practices like informally learning in private course. Last but not least, technology that can be potentially support learning currently still become barriers in many areas in Indonesia because of its unavailability.

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