

Identifying English Text Reading Comprehension Problems in Senior High School Students

Rohani Ganie^a, Deliana^b, Tengku Silvana Sinar^c, ^{a,b,c}Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia, Email: rohani@usu.ac.id, deliana413@gmail.com, tengkusilvana@usu.ac.id

The Indonesian government allocates English as a compulsory subject for junior and senior high school. However, the English language skills of students in Indonesia are still weak compared to the neighbouring countries of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. Among the English language skills, reading comprehension skills are the most focused upon skill for high school students. The aims of this study are to identify the problems in reading comprehension of English texts. The data analysis used is thematic analysis. The results of this study show that there were three major problems in reading comprehension faced by the student, including internal and external problems. The internal problems faced by students were related to three sub-themes; students' limited understanding of the vocabulary in the reading texts, and a lack of motivation to learn English caused by inappropriate teaching techniques for reading comprehension. The external problems were lack of teaching materials and environment. These problems have been overcome by implementing cultural components into English learning and by providing appropriate teaching methods based on the genre of texts, student need and characteristics.

Key words: *Reading Comprehension, Junior and senior school, Thematic analysis.*

Introduction

The Indonesian government qualifies English as a compulsory subject for junior and senior high school all over the country. This indicates that learning English is important. This can be seen from the stipulation of English as one of the National Exams in Indonesia through Amendment to Government Regulation Number 19 of 2005 concerning National Education Standards, in article 70 paragraph 3 which states; at the level of *SMP/MTs/ SMPLB*, or other equivalent forms, the National Examination covers lessons in Indonesian, English,

Mathematics, and Natural Sciences (IPA). In addition, paragraph 5 states that in *SMA/MA/SMALB* or other equivalent forms, the National Examination covers subjects in Indonesian, English, Mathematics, and subjects that are characteristic of educational programs. Paragraph 7S states that at the level of *SMK/MAK* or other equivalent forms, the National Examination covers lessons in Indonesian, English, Mathematics and vocational subjects that are characteristic of educational programs.

In the English teaching and learning process, there are four skills that are identified as very important; listening, speaking, reading and writing (Brown, 2001). The ability to read opens new knowledge and opportunities, especially the ability to read texts in foreign languages, in this case, English. This allows students to gain information, to experience pleasure and do many other things that are done by the world community, thanks to information obtained from reading. Better reading skills also enable people to be successful in academia (Iftanti, 2015). A current study shows that the better the reading skills students have the better students are in achieving knowledge (Akbaşlı, Şahin, & Yaykiran, 2016).

In spite of this, the English language skills of students and society in Indonesia are still weak compared to the neighbouring countries of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. English First (EF) announced the results of a global survey of an 'English Proficiency Index' (EF EPI) in Jakarta; Indonesia scored 52.91, ranked 32nd out of the 72 countries surveyed globally. EF EPI is the largest survey that measures English ability in countries around the world and is considered an international benchmark for adult English proficiency. The results of this year's survey show that Singapore is the top Asian country in terms of English language proficiency, followed by Malaysia and the Philippines which included the top 15. Comparatively, Indonesia achieved lower scores than several neighbouring countries in the region, including Vietnam in 31st position, classified as 'middle level' (Gunawan, 2016). This result indicates low reading and understanding of English texts by students. The low level of literacy of Indonesian students has become a major nation-wide concern in Indonesia. The 2015 PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) result shows that Indonesian students' literacy level in English was one of the lowest in the world (Anandari & Iswandari, 2019). As a student the ability to read and understand text is very important to grasp the information contained in the text. Therefore, improving the quality of English language in synergy with students' reading comprehension would help not only in terms of English language learning, but also to improve the quality of student ability and knowledge as a whole.

High School Students are the last stage of study before entering college and university life in the education system of Indonesia. At this stage, the level of English understanding will have (and must) enter the intermediate level. This can be seen from the curriculum and expected outcomes in English as a subject. High school students have also learned about various types



of texts in English. This can be seen from the exam questions they will face, namely those in the National Examination and the College Entrance Examination. Therefore, reading comprehension skills are very important and useful for high school students.

Reading comprehension is an advanced level of reading and/or reading skills. There are at least two levels of reading, the initial level and level of reading comprehension. The initial level is teaching reading where the teacher introduces to students orthographic writing in separate alphabetical order. At this point, the teacher generally teaches students some basic English vocabulary to contextualise a phonemic knowledge of letters. Reading comprehension is a higher reading skill level again. Students must be able to use their cognitive skills to understand the interrelated conditions between written and oral communication, and where basically these types of communication differ from each other (Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2015).

Furthermore, learning language, especially a foreign language, is closely related to the culture of its nation. This implies that someone who studies a particular language without understanding the culture the language exists in has the potential to become a person who is "eloquently foolish" (Bennet, Bennet & Allen, 2003). In other words, to accomplish greater significant results in foreign language learning, one must also pay attention to the culture of the language's nation.

The word culture may be a word that is often heard and easy to say, but difficult to define. When culture is defined, what emerges is a variety of meanings based on certain perspectives, from sociology, anthropology, to linguistics. Do not be surprised if the word culture becomes one of the difficult words to define; according to Barker (2008) culture is considered not to have a "true and definitive" meaning. From this definition, when we have difference in some culture aspects, it is presumably difficult to attain greater results in language learning when we ignore the presence of culture in a language.

Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest it as the first qualitative method that should be learned, as it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other kinds of analysis. There are many different ways to approach thematic analysis. The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, that is, patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and to use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue. Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between two levels of themes: semantic and latent. Semantic themes are within the explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written.

Based on the explanation above, there are few problems that are going to be discussed in this paper. The first problem is to identify obstacles or problems Indonesian students have in learning English text reading comprehension. And the second one is to provide solutions within the problems found.

Method

Data and Data Source

The data of this study are words, phrases and sentences uttered and stated by students and teachers in the teaching and learning process. The data sources are recorded video and audio of reading comprehension during an English text teaching and learning activity, plus questionnaires and interview results from teachers and students and also the observers notes.

The questionnaires for students and teachers consist of 22 question with a five-scale level; from very much agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2) and very much disagree (1). The questionnaires will be attached in appendices or added as a supplementary file. The interview questions consist of five questions for both student and teachers. The interview questions will also be attached in appendices or added as a supplementary file.

Time and Location of Study

The observation began in January and carried on through to July (2019). There are five school samples that determined using a purposive sampling, which meet the criteria. The school criteria were a school with 'A' Accreditation. The location is in Medan, Sumatera Utara Province and the schools permitted the observers to record the classes. The school names cannot be stated in this paper due to terms and conditions that have been agreed upon between the researchers and school chairmen.

Research Instruments

This study used an audio camera to record the teaching and learning process, and questionnaires distributed to student and teachers. The application used to transcribe the video was an f4transkript application.

The calculation process uses a Linkert Scale.

$$\text{Percentage index} = \frac{\text{Total Score}}{Y} \times 100$$

Table 1 shows the scale.

Table 1: Value Percentage

90% – 100%	Very Good
70% – 89.99%	Good
50% – 69.99%	Neutral
30% – 49.99%	Has Problems
0% – 29.99%	Very Problematic

Data Analysis

The data analysis used is the thematic analysis method. This analysis was used to find out what problems exist in the teaching and learning process of reading comprehension of English texts by high school students in the city of Medan.

In contrast, the latent level looks beyond what has been said and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.

The data obtained was analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a six-phase guide framework for conducting this analysis.

Table 2: Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework for thematic analysis

Step 1: Become familiar with the data,	Step 4: Review themes,
Step 2: Generate initial codes,	Step 5: Define themes,
Step 3: Search for themes	Step 6: Write-up

The first step in any qualitative analysis is reading and re-reading the transcripts. In this stage the research data is comprehended thoroughly. In the second phase, the researcher starts to organise the data in a meaningful and systematic way. Coding reduces lots of data into small chunks of meaning. There are different ways to code and the method will be determined by perspective and research questions. In this stage, the data is grouped according to similarity. The focus of each group is given a code. The data can be based on the origin or sources, the similar semantic aspect and so on.

As defined earlier, a theme is a pattern that captures something significant or interesting about the data and/or research question. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, there are no hard and fast rules about what makes a theme. A theme is characterised by its significance. In this case the researchers examined the codes and some of them clearly fitted together into a theme. For example, several codes are related to the problems that come from the student’s

inner self. Therefore, the theme created for it becomes “Problems from the Student”. In the fourth phase the researcher reviews, modifies and develops the preliminary themes that are already identified in Step 3. Do they make sense? At this point it is useful to gather together all the data that is relevant to each theme. The data associated with each theme is examined and considered as to whether the data really does support it. The next step is to think about whether the themes work in the context of the entire data set. In this example, the data set is one extract. Usually it will have more than this and the researcher will have to consider how the themes work both within a single interview and across all the interviews. Themes should be coherent and they should be distinct from each other. Things to think about include: Do the themes make sense? Does the data support the themes? If themes overlap, are they really separate themes? Are there themes within themes (subthemes)? Are there other themes within the data?

For example, the theme, Problems from the Student: does this theme accord with our research question? Will this theme answer the problem stated in the background to the study? Those kinds of questions are used to review the validity of themes made by the researchers. After the review stage, there will be some changes on the corpus data of the research. There will be some themes deleted or some subthemes added to a theme, etcetera.

There is then the final refinement of the themes and the aim is to identify the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about (Braun & Clarke, 2006). What is the theme saying? If there are subthemes, how do they interact and relate to the main theme? How do the themes relate to each other? In this analysis, reading comprehension problems of English texts by high school students in Medan are rooted in the other themes and display as a map theme. Usually the end-point of research is some kind of report, often a journal article or dissertation. This step is the final result of thematic analysis and the product is a journal article.

Findings and Discussions

Based on the data analysis three main themes were found, which represented the problems faced in reading comprehension learning. These were problems from student self, problems from the teacher and external problems. The themes were derived from the data analysis presented in table 3 below:

Table 3: The results of data calculation based on questionnaires and interviews

No.	Theme	Score
1.	Student interest in English subject	43.74%
2.	Students Basic Language Skills of English	68.80%
3.	Application of English reading comprehension material	73.50%
4.	Tools and supporting materials for the learning process	68%
5.	Other factors from outside the school and the teacher	69%

The only problem arising from the data analysis is based on ‘Student interest in English subject’, that shows an emerging problem in studying English Text Reading Comprehension. Therefore, from this problem the possibility of other problems can then be jotted down, according to thematic analysis. The student interest in the subject related to three different factors: the problem from the student’s self, problem from the teachers, and external factors.

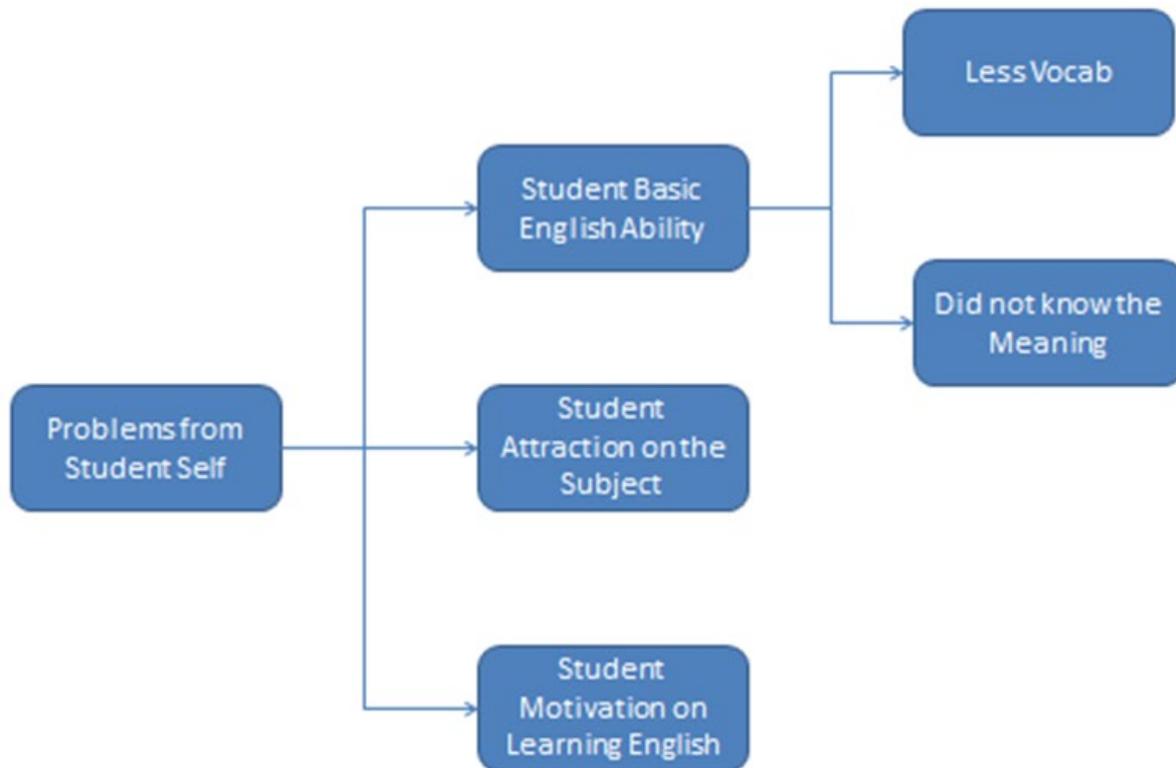
Problems from Student Self

The student problem based on their inner-self is described below by the answer to such questions as: a) what are the differences in grammar between English and Indonesian? Most of them did not know the answer even most of them agreed that they had already learnt English for more than five years (and varied from seven to nine years). For students who had already been taught the subject for this amount of time (half of their educational journey), the lack of understanding is miserable.

For answering the other question related to reading comprehension, that is: b) do you know about reading comprehension? Have you have done it? Students tend to be confused by this question, with most of them answering, ‘I don’t know’. This occurred during a class entered by the researcher-observer, when the students performed the reading comprehension study. This is a core problem, something basic is missing in the process of teaching and learning English, especially in Reading Comprehension of an English Text.

The writer tried to connect this finding to the theme mention above. As the core for analysis and to initiate further findings, ‘student attraction to the subject’ is depicted as below:

Figure 1. Reading Comprehension Problems from Student Self



Based on the observation and data analysis, the first problems mentioned in the problem of reading comprehension of an English text were problems that emerged from the student individual. These problems focus on the student's basic knowledge of English. Basic English means the English proficiency that the student has before entering senior high school (before this stage of education). These kind of problems resulted in an incapacity to understand the meaning (as an Indonesian translation) of the text they read. Not knowing the meaning of a word naturally means the message will not transfer to them in its full aspects. In reading comprehension one must understand the messages contained in the texts to be able to be categorised as having good reading comprehension. Furthermore, students were not familiar with the vocabulary in the text; the students had a limited vocabulary. This was portrayed in the misspelling of words. This is in accordance with Ulfa (2012) which states that most of the student scores in English were below the minimal competencies criterion. This means that the students' basic English knowledge was below average and affected their ability in reading comprehension. The same statement, also provided in Hasibuan's (2018) research result, states that students still have problems getting information from the text, with some of the reasons being lack of vocabulary, lack of catching the main idea, difficulties with pronunciation, and being uninterested in reading.

The other emphases of reading comprehension problems that emerged from the student were student attraction toward the subject and their motivation toward learning English in general.

Student attraction to English as a subject is surprisingly very different in the facts of student attitudes and study assessment results from the questionnaire and interview results. Most students were interesting in studying English but in fact English is still not very well performed, either actively or passively, in their actual life.

The students were aware of the importance of English to their future, and because of this many students feel motivated to study English, but the realisation is nowhere near the reality. This phenomenon exists presumably because English teaching in Indonesia has not met the maximal development, many sectors still need to improve to attain a greater result in English as a subject. This is contrary to Ulfa (2012), who states that there were students who did not have good motivation to read and felt the text was not interesting because they had to look up words in a dictionary to find out their meaning. These activities made them feel bored and uninterested in reading comprehension. This kind of studying performance was often found in Indonesian English Teaching classrooms. Despite the fact that language classes should be fun and filled with practice, students were more passive and only did the exercise to assess their reading comprehension in the subject. This can be related to the previous problems which state a student lack of vocabulary and interpretation of meaning. Because of these problems another problem occurred, despite the student's awareness of the importance of studying English. Perhaps another way of teaching reading comprehension is needed to answer this problem, which relates to the other main problems of reading comprehension.

Image 1. Student in Medan when Studying English Reading Comprehension



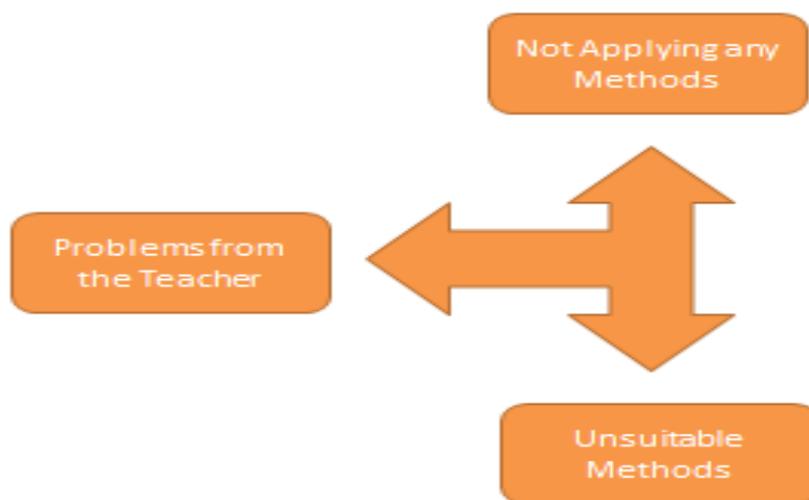
To overcome these problems, much work from parents, government and teachers is needed. Parents and the government should provide many opportunities to students to learn English, not only at school but also at many other occasions. Teachers are needed here to build up a student characteristic of studying a foreign language differently to other subjects. This can begin by introducing the culture of the United Kingdom.

Problems from the Teacher

Problems faced in reading comprehension of English texts also arise from the teacher. The students were asked about the teachers' performances and any other related aspects that

correlated with the study. For example; a) did they know about reading comprehension? Most of them did know what is it, even though they actually do it quite often. This means that the teacher, as sole information provider, did not provide it properly. There was a missing link. Moreover, questions such as those; b) regarding teachers' performances, and c) methods used in presenting reading comprehension were getting quite enough score. Some students were satisfied with teacher performances and methods but some others were not and were confused. Also, when discussing materials and their application, many thought it needed improvement. The questions that emerged this claim were; d) does the books/material used in English/reading comprehension interest you? And e) does it meet your expectation, both the physical and the application of it? Figure 2 below charts problems from the teachers.

Figure 2. Reading Comprehension Problems from the Teacher



Based on the data, the other theme of reading comprehension problems was problems stemming from the teachers. These problems arose mainly due to the teacher's way of teaching. Many teachers used monotonous methods to teach reading comprehension; read – mimic reading – discuss the meaning and answer the question. Some used new methods but their application was not effective for the student. This was in accordance with Soemantri (2011), which states that traditional teaching is still applied in much classroom teaching. Soemantri (2011) also states that a lecturing technique was uninteresting while others state that it is monotonous. However, the teaching and learning process was dominated by the teacher, as indicated by 70% of students who convinced the researcher that lectures are still dominated by the lecturer (teacher centred). This problem relates to the cultural background of Indonesia; there is a gap between students and teachers because of manners toward older people. Teachers are regarded as knowledgeable and students, customarily, are considered rude or impolite to differ from the teachers (Masduqi, 2014) as the students' knowledge is not comparable yet to their teacher. This may result in many awkward moments in class and

creates a passive student. In other countries students are more active in the class, resulting in a good environment for study. This is also proved by Iswandari and Paradita (2019) in their article, which quotes Professor Paul Nation (their article consists of the interviewed data with Prof. Paul Nation). Nation states that in Indonesia, particularly during his teaching time, language-focused learning seemed to be emphasised more by teachers. Instead of making up about a quarter of the course (25%), it often made up more than 70 to 80% of the course. He hoped teachers nowadays would have successfully balanced those four strands in their language classes.

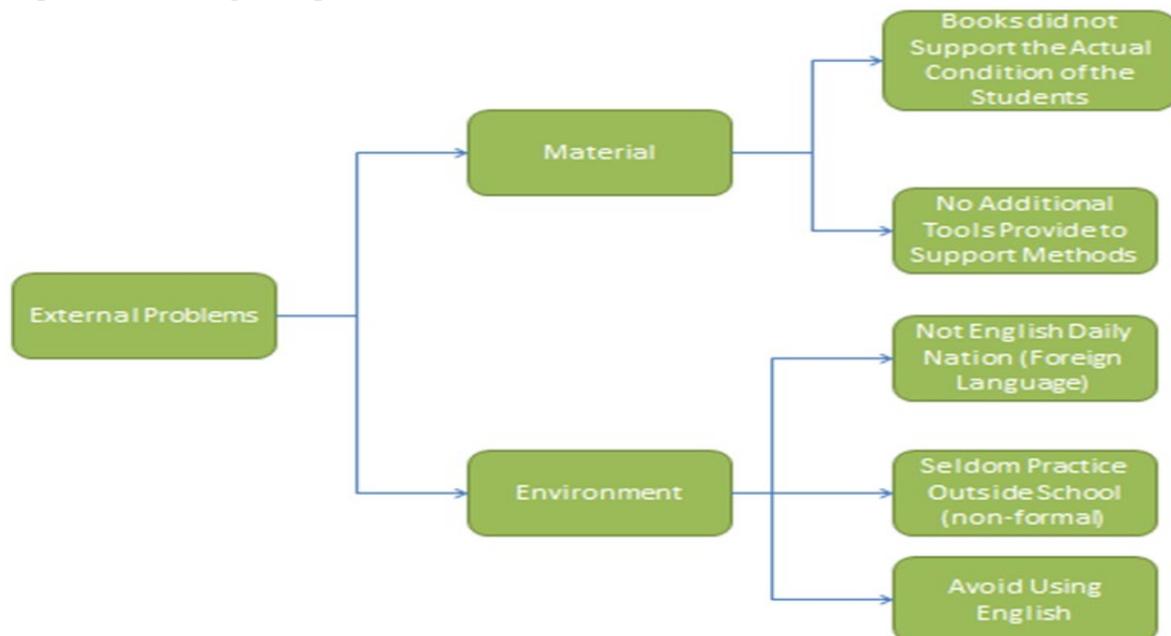
The other focus on this theme was the fact that some reading texts are based on genre structure, and different genres need different ways of interpreting and comprehending. Because of this, many methods were invented to comprehend different types of reading text genres. This was in accordance with Hasibuan's (2018) statement that most teachers just explained and read the text, and couldn't give more understanding about the text. Teachers must have the skills and competence to apply the appropriate teaching strategies, methods, approaches and techniques that motivate students to enjoy the print materials that they distribute.

External Problems

The last theme of problems that correlate with student attraction towards the subject is from external factors. The main focus of this problem derived from asking questions about; a) schools' tools and other additional equipment to support study and b) their school living conditions.

These factors resulted in further problems related to student attraction towards the reading comprehension subject. The material did not support them and the environment did not support their study. Materials can subsist of such things as supporting tools, for example some teachers also mentioned the use of a Language Laboratory to study. This evidence is presented in the chart below:

Figure 3. Reading Comprehension Problems from External Factors



The last major theme for reading comprehension problems in English texts faced by students came from external problems. External problems mean that these problems did not originate from the teacher nor the student, but from different aspects of them both. The first sub-theme of external problems comes from the teaching material. Materials included a text book for teaching and learning and also other supplementary tools for teaching, or could be audio-visual electronic equipment such as speakers and in-focus, or others. The text book is an important tool in teaching hence the use of the text book is crucial. In reality, books used in teaching English are already good, with many activities and interesting material, but the application of the books is not maximal due to lack of support from the school and a lack of student anticipation. Because of thi, teachers tend to choose material that is possible to apply in class. Heed the qualification prepared in the curriculum.

The second sub-theme was the environment. In Indonesia, English still acts as a foreign language which makes it difficult for students to improve their basic English knowledge. Students in Indonesia seldom hear people speak English, they seldom use it themselves in conversation, nor read books in English; in short, the Indonesian student is not familiar with English. This contributes to English becoming hard to learn. This is in accordance with Suwandy et. Al. (2018) which states that students seldom participate in a classroom interaction due to their lack of conversation as the signals of their interactions with each other and the teacher. Firstly, they did not know how to respond in English. Secondly, the students were not confident to speak in English. Then, students often used Indonesian language to respond. The interaction also showed that only one source of teaching occurred, which was from the teacher only. The teacher dominated the classroom interaction with few responses

from the students. This means there is no response from students and also the feedback. In its relation to reading comprehension, students' lack of practice resulted in a low level of literacy, later affecting students' ability to understand what they read. Qiu, et. al., (2019) question if in reading comprehension, does the student read because they are told to? Or do they read because they want to? Firstly, if you want to increase student attraction to the subject, give them material that they like to read and they need to read. Then both their curiosity and study habit will grow.

Conclusion

Based on the research results, problems face by students in reading comprehension of English texts are attributable to three major themes; the first was problems arising from the student-self consisting of three parts; students' basic English ability, less attraction to the subject and not being motivated. These problems can be overcome by cooperation between parents, government and teachers. Parents and government need to provide facilities to students for improving their basic English knowledge because in reality students know the importance of English for their life.

The second problem was problems arising from the teacher. Problems from the teacher were not using any method while teaching and using inappropriate methods. These problems can be overcome by analysing student characteristics and then referring to methods appropriate to such students, such as from research in journals.

The third problem was external problems, which were material and environmental. For material factors teachers can outsmart restraints by conducting research groups in the class. By applying an active class model, material problems can be overcome. Students can solve problems themselves by looking at other materials and working together in a group. For the environmental factor, the application of cultural based learning in applying foreign language learning is needed, to create a good environment for the student.

Acknowledgement

The writers convey their thanks to Lembaga Penelitian Universitas Sumatera Utara for TALENTA grant research number: 4167/UN5.1.R/PPM/2019, dated on 1st April 2019.

REFERENCES

- Akbaşlı, S., Şahin, M., & Yaykiran, Z. (2016). *The Effect of Reading Comprehension on the Performance in Science and Mathematics*. Journal of Education and Practice, Vol. 7, No. 16, pp. 108-121.
- Anandari, C. L. and Iswandari, Y. A. (2019). Extensive Reading in Indonesian Schools: A Successful Story. TEFLIN Journal, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 137-152.
- Barker, C. (2008). *Cultural studies: Theory and practice (3rd ed.)*. London: Sage.
- Bennet, J. M., Bennet, M. J., & Allen, W. (2003). *Developing intercultural competence in the language classroom*. In Lange, D. L., & Paige, M. P. (Eds.), *Culture as the core: Perspectives on culture in second language learning (pp. 237-270)*. Greenwich: Information Age Publishing.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. Qualitative Research in Psychology, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 77-101.
- Brown, H.D. (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. San Francisco State University
- Gunawan, H. (2016). *Kemampuan Bahasa Inggris Masyarakat Indonesia Masih Rendah*. Tribunnews.com. Retrieved from: <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2016/12/19/kemampuan-bahasa-inggris-masyarakat-indonesia-masih-rendah>
- Hasibuan, S. F. (2018). *The Implementation of Trading Place Strategy to Improve the Students' Ability in Reading Comprehension of Report Text at Eight Grade Of Mts S. Al-Husna Marindal Medan Academic Year 2018/2019*. Proceedings of the 1st Annual International Conference on Language and Literature (AICLL), 18-19 April 2018, Fakultas Sastra, UISU, Medan, Indonesia. Pp 131-139.
- Iftanti, E. (2015). *What makes EFL students establish good reading habit in English*. International Journal of Education and Research, Vol. 3, No. 5, pp. 365-374.
- Iswandari, Y. A. and Paradita, L. I. (2019). *Extensive Reading in EFL Setting: A Special Interview with Professor Paul Nation*. TEFLIN Journal, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 187-196.
- Masduqi, H. (2014). *EFL Reading in Indonesian Universities: Perspectives and Challenges in Cultural Contexts*. Journal of Teaching and Education, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 385–397.



- Oakhill, J., Cain, K., & Elbro, C. (2015). *Understanding and Teaching Reading Comprehension: A handbook*. New York: Routledge.
- Qiu, R. N., Willy A. R. & Chong M. Y. C. (2019). *Extensive Reading: Theory, Research and Implementation*. TEFLIN Journal, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 171-186.
- Soemantri, A. S. (2011). *Reading Comprehension Problems Encountered by The Students of Higher Education*. Jurnal Computech & Bisnis, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 74-80.
- Suwandy, I., Siti Aisah, G. and Rita, S. (2018). *Classroom Interaction with Different Subject based on Sinclair and Coulthard Model*. Register journal.
- Ulfa, S. (2011). *Improving Students' Achievement in Reading Comprehension Through Learning Together Method*. FBS Unimed.