

## Dealing with Common Challenges in Improving Reading Comprehension Skills for Indonesian Secondary School Students

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### ABSTRACT

*It is expected that Indonesian secondary school students learn to read in English for fulfilling school requirements (for both learning and testing). However, many students have a problem in reading textbooks caused by the lack of students' understanding in answering the comprehension questions correctly. This leads to students' lack of interest in reading. Having collected the relevant pieces of literature and data, we concluded that students' motivation, the students' awareness of reading text genre, and the proper implementation of reading strategies are the effective solution to enhance Indonesian secondary students' reading comprehension skills. This study offers some important insights to the research in reading skills not only academically but in daily life. Moreover, the study is to facilitate English teachers in understanding students' reading comprehension problems, what strategies to apply in teaching reading and how to choose the suitable reading text genre to make their students achieve better in their academic performance and to make the students' love reading.*

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### 1. Introduction

Reading is considered one of the most important skills in English language learning. It is described as an activity that lasts for a lifetime, whether people use it for academic or pleasure purposes (Olasehinde et al., 2015). Moreover, some researchers even claim that reading is one of the required skills for students' success in the academic world (Logan, Medford, & Hughes, 2011; Yunus & Taslim, 2016). Students do a reading for several purposes, such as for the assignments or tests, entertainments, and searching for information (Bismoko & Nation, 1974; Day, 2002; Delfi & Yamat, 2017; Iftanti, 2012; Linderholm, 2006).

Even though reading is vital for students, however, secondary school students in Indonesia face some difficulties in reading. The problem with reading in the Indonesian context lies in some factors such as the difficulty of a text, students' understanding of the reading text materials given, students' lack of awareness in reading text genre, students' ignorance of applying the reading strategies, and students' motivation to read (Agustin et.al, 2013; Barnes; 2015; Devitt, 2004; Esteria, 2017; Harahap, 2012; Iftanti, 2012; Linderholm, 2006; Narvaez, 2002; Riani; 2013; Rozimela; 2014; Suryanto, 2017). Students' difficulties in reading result in several issues, such as students' poor achievements in the standardized test, students' weakness in interpreting information from the reading, students' difficulties to find meaning using contextual clues, and students' low ability to comprehend analytical exposition texts (Fitrisia et.al, 2015; Komariah et.al, 2015; Riani, 2013).

This essay argues that students' motivation, awareness of text genre, and the proper implementation of reading strategies can be utilized to help students deal with reading difficulties. The term reading comprehension in this essay is defined as the process of understanding meaning through interaction and involvement with written language based on the reader's experiences, knowledge, vocabulary, and structure of the language (Esteria, 2017; Snow, 2002). Moreover, reading skill is defined as a set of motivational goals of fluency, effortlessness, and accuracy that more emphasized taking pleasure in inability rather than effort (Afflerbach, Pearson, Paris, 2008).

This essay brings some beneficial insights for academic discourse, teachers, and students in some ways. Firstly, this essay can offer some important insights into the research gap about the usage of reading comprehension skills in everyday life. Several studies have been made to discuss about reading comprehension problems, the applicable reading strategies, the relationship between students' motivation with reading comprehension and the importance of reading text genre awareness (Agustin et.al, 2013; Cahyono & Widiati, 2006; Day, 2002; Esteria, 2017; Iftanti, 2012; Maman & Rajab, 2016; Mason, 2006; Narvaez, 2002; Olasehinde et.al, 2015; Riani, 2013; Rozimela, 2014; Santi & Reed, 2015; Sinambela et.al, 2015; Suryanto, 2017; Yunus & Taslim, 2016) which mainly focused on students' academic achievements.

Secondly, this essay will help to facilitate English language teachers in understanding the students' reading comprehension problem, what strategies to apply in teaching reading and how to choose the suitable reading text genre to make the students achieve better in their academic performance as well as to make the students love reading and use their reading skills in the daily life. Then, it will increase students' awareness about the genre of text that they are reading, to apply the right reading strategies, and to be more motivated in loving reading to achieve better in their academic and use their reading skills in their daily life.

## **2. Methodology**

This research is based on a library approach. Researchers collected the relevant works of literature and data on the issue being studied, which is on the difficulties that Indonesian secondary students experienced when dealing with English readings. Moreover, this research utilized the descriptive qualitative method. A descriptive method is an approach that seeks to provide a description and interpretation of what it is regarding a condition and the relationship between a symptom and other symptoms and the ongoing process (Best, 1977: 116, in Slamet, 2018: 124).

One of the main reasons this method is used is because it provides a solution and offers important ideas to the researchers in analyzing the causes and in proposing solutions for Indonesian secondary school students in improving their reading comprehension skills. Nazir (1998) states that descriptive research is to describe a picture or painting systematically, factually, and accurately regarding facts, properties, and relationships between existing phenomena. The descriptive qualitative method is suitable to describe a concept of thought, which is—in this case—improving reading comprehension skills in Indonesian secondary schools. According to the researchers, this method is simple to use in analyzing and collecting data.

## **3. Result and Discussion**

### **3.1 Reading Motivation**

The term reading motivation is defined by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) as "the individual's personal goals, values, and beliefs concerning the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading". Furthermore, students' motivation towards the reading topics' is considered as an important factor that influences the understanding of information (Martin, 1991).

Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, and Perencevich (2004) in their research stated that reading is an activity that usually involves a choice that makes motivation is important to reading engagement. Moreover, motivation is considered an important part of language learning. Sinambela, Manik, and Pangaribuan (2015) stated in their research that motivation is related to the attitude to reach the target language. This statement is aligned with the Indonesian context where students learned English as Foreign Language which is the target language. Concerning reading skills, Esteria (2017) found that students must find enjoyment in reading and they must feel motivated to read the given materials. Another researcher, Gambrell (2011) said that it is crucial to focus on motivation to support students to become "proficient, persistent, and passionate readers".

However, the problem with motivation is not only relied on students only. The English teachers also realized that it is a challenge to foster students' motivation to read (Campbell & Kmiecik, 2004; Gambrell et al., 1981) as teachers play an important part in motivating their students to be able to love reading English materials (Yulia, 2013). In general situation, teachers must struggle and spend more energy to motivate their students to actively participate in the class and to ensure their understanding of the reading lesson (Damayanti, 2017). To conclude, students need to understand the type of reading motivation that they have as motivation is one of the important factors that can improve reading comprehension skills and reading comprehension strategies in different conditions (Ahmadi & Hairul, 2012).

### **3.2 Indonesian Secondary Students' Reading Motivation**

There are two types of reading motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation. Guthrie et al. (2000) defined intrinsic reading motivation as a people's tendency to read purely for the enjoyment, interest, and excitement of reading.

There are three constructs of intrinsic reading motivation as stated by Guthrie et al. (2004): curiosity, involvement, and preference of challenge. A reader who is motivated intrinsically wants to read because they want to learn about topics of personal interest, to experience pleasure reading interesting materials, and to gain satisfaction from tackling challenging ideas presented in text (Komiya, 2013).

Meanwhile, extrinsic reading motivation is defined as a people's tendency to read to get some separated results (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to Wang and Guthrie (2004), there are five constructs of extrinsic reading motivation: Competition, Compliance, Recognition for Reading, Grades, and Social. Extrinsically motivated readers, therefore, were thought to read to fulfill requirements, outperform peers, obtain good evaluations and recognition from others, and share what they read with others (Komiya, 2013).

As in the Indonesian context, investigations showed many different reasons that motivated students to read, mostly from extrinsic reading motivation such as national school exam, graded school assignments, the desire to compete and gain the highest score in reading class, English standardized test and get a good mark from the teacher (Iftanti, 2012; Salikin, Bin-Tahir, Kusumaningputri & Yuliandari, 2017a; Wang & Guthrie, 2004; Yulia, 2013; Yuliandari et al., 2016). Meanwhile, there are only some investigations that discussed intrinsic reading motivation: students' curiosity over a reading topic that they are interested in (Hartono, 2016), the curiosity to get information written, and to understand the meaning of every word in English text (Dakhi & Damanik, 2018), the challenge for more experienced students to have more desire in reading difficult English texts (Salikin, Bin-Tahir, Kusumaningputri & Yuliandari, 2017b).

To conclude, secondary students in Indonesia need to know what motivates them to read as motivation is one of the most important aspects that has an impact on reading comprehension skills. If the students can have the balance of both intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation, it will help improve their reading comprehension skills to be better both in academics and in their daily life. Motivation can support students to become engaged and passionate readers.

### **3.3 Implication between students' reading motivation and reading comprehension skills**

This section will discuss more on how students' reading motivation can affect students' reading comprehension skills. The first important thing to discuss is reading is a process of engagement and as a reader, people must feel engaged to the text they read to completely understand what they have read. Gambrell et al. (1981) explained four factors that make someone become an engaged reader:

- a) They are motivated
- b) They are knowledgeable
- c) They are strategic
- d) They are socially interactive

The focus of this section is on motivation. If the students as an engaged reader are motivated means that they can choose to read for a variety for purposes (e.g., read to gain new knowledge, to escape into the literary world of the text and to learn how to perform a task) (Gambrell, 1966). The problems at the beginning of secondary school are that there has been decreasing motivation to read as some researchers have found (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Guthrie, 2008; Wigfield, 2004). Furthermore, decreasing students' motivation in reading is a problem for all teachers (Massey, 2015).

Previous studies have argued that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has a strong impact on reading comprehension proficiency (e.g, Ahmadi, 2017; Dornyei et.al, 2006; Gottfried, 1990; Grabe, 2009; Lucas et.al, 2010; Morgan & Fuchs, 2007). Students who feel intrinsically motivated will use more reading comprehension strategies rather than the less motivated one (Chang, 2005; Garcia & Pintrich, 1991; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). Salikin et al., (2017) and McGeown et al. (2012) noted that high-achieving students may be driven by external motivations such as trying to achieve higher grades and outperforming their peers.

Moreover, motivation may have more advantages for improving reading comprehension skills over time as students who are motivated may put more cognitive effort into understanding texts and solving unfamiliar words (Logan et.al, 2011). Another positive impact of motivation is that the more motivated, the more often students will choose to read, this attitude and the willingness to read make a great contribution to the reading improvement (Wilson & Casey, 2007).

On the other hand, some researchers thought that motivation only has an impact on students who have poor reading comprehension skills (Logan et al., 2011) and there is no significant impact of motivation on text comprehension for EFL learners (Takase, 2007). Most of the students' reading motivation is invested for academic purposes in increasing

standardized test scores rather than reading for pleasure or recreational reading. Reading for pleasure or recreational reading has also been shown to increase student reading achievement (Wilson & Casey, 2007). To conclude, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have a positive impact as a solution to enhance students' reading comprehension skills. However, it will be more useful if students do not apply their motivation is mostly academic reading as reading for pleasure or recreational reading is also useful to improve the reading comprehension skills.

### **3.4 Reading Text Genre Awareness**

In Indonesian secondary school, high school students are expected to be able to communicate in English by using several selected texts of different genres (Rozimela, 2014). This is based on the implementation of the 2014 high school curriculum competency-based approach. In contrast to the expectations, the students find it very difficult to comprehend various English texts of different genres as their reading skills are below average (Rozimela, 2014b). Rukmini (2004) found that the unfamiliarity with various text genres is also one factor that caused students to lack interest in reading. These findings agree with León and Escudero's (2015) finding that text genre can influence reading comprehension skills.

It is necessary here to define what is the meaning of reading text genre awareness. According to the definition of the genre by Martin (1997) and Rozimela (2014), the genre is "goal-oriented social processes that are highly structured, conventionalized and relatively stable in a form which serves in a particular social context". Meanwhile, the term different text genre is defined by Bruce (2008) as "texts which are achieving different purposes in the culture". To understand the meaning of the text, readers must have genre knowledge which includes an understanding of the social and cultural contexts of genres, the language choices, and a sense of the appropriateness of the norms and values in the certain context (Paltridge, 2002; Toledo, 2005). In the reading context, effective readers must know a genre that includes awareness of names, purposes, and language features (Hyons, 2002). To get students to learn how to implement reading text genre skills for reading, teachers' assistance to provide examples and guidance is needed as most of the students have low ability about awareness of text genre (Feez, 2002).

### **3.5 The importance of reading text genre awareness in relation to students' reading comprehension skills**

Having explained briefly about reading text genre awareness, the following section will discuss the importance of having the skills of text genre awareness as a solution to enhance students' reading comprehension skills. Reading comprehension skills is said to be affected by people's ability to deal with text genre (Francis & Hallam, 2000; Suryanto, 2017).

Moreover, Hyons (2002) in her research stated that if the teachers who are teaching genre in the class will have some benefits in students' reading skills such as heightened the students' attention to formal rhetorical features, increased students' awareness of the position of key ideas, enhancing their reading speed and improved their enjoyment of reading. Genre awareness also helps in reading comprehension because learners can understand the general ideas from text structure, locate the certain information that is needed to find, and understand how one point is related to another (Coffin, 1997; Veel, 1997).

However, there is also research that showed the disadvantage of having the ability to read text genre awareness as students are considered failed to understand the purpose of the text (Beaufort & Williams, 2005). Meanwhile, Negretti and Kuteeva (2011) in their research suggested not only to teach learners about genre knowledge and raising their genre awareness but learners must also to be taught about the functions and characteristics of the genre.

To conclude, reading text genre awareness is one of the most important skills that students should have because knowing the characteristics of a certain text genre will help the students to understand more about the genre before doing reading as the assignments or writing for a response (Johns, 2008). Furthermore, Jones et al. (2006) stated that understanding genre means not to memorizes it as the formats, but genre awareness can also be used as a functional strategy for achieving the particular purpose.

### **3.6 Reading Strategies**

In this following section, I will discuss the type of reading strategies that can be used as solutions to enhance students' reading comprehension skills. Before proceeding to discuss further the strategies, it will be necessary to define the term reading strategies. A generally accepted definition of reading strategies is lacking because the word 'reading' and 'strategy' usually are defined separately. However, this essay will use the definition by Afflerbach et al. (2008) who describes reading strategies as "readers skills that are motivated by control, good decision making, and adaptability that reinforce self-efficacy based on both ability and effort". Furthermore, they also stated that if readers are strategic, they will

feel confident with their reading that they can monitor and improve their reading skills through knowledge and motivation to succeed.

Reading strategies is a major students' problem, and some factors caused it. These are common teachers' instructions for most students to read for many ranges of academic purposes such as preparing for an upcoming text, discussing text content with others, and to write a summary of the text (Bråten & Samuelstuen, 2004). Those factors are initial for students to decide and apply the reading strategies accordingly. Another thing to consider is that students cannot practice the reading strategies by themselves, as they must be engaged as the teachers teaching comprehension strategies in the class (Helen & Greenleaf, 2007; Janzen, 2002).

To conclude, students need to know the type of reading strategies. If students can apply the proper reading strategies to the text they read, it will help them to understand the reading text better to answer the questions given or to do the task given by the teacher. Moreover, the aim of teaching reading strategies is not only to make students become successful readers, but it is also to make them metacognitive to comprehend the material effectively by understanding how reading works, how to identify, and how to fix the problem. (Afflerbach et al., 2008; Almasi, 2003; Pressley, 2002; Suryanto, 2017).

### **3.7 Type of reading strategies**

In the following section, we will discuss some reading strategies that can be used for teaching the students to have practiced these strategies so they can be transformed into useful reading skills that students can use to enhance their reading comprehension skills.

First, Mistar, Zuhairi, and Yanti (2016) mentioned three simple reading strategies: predicting, text mapping, and summarizing. Meanwhile, Tan and Yusuf (2015) suggested some reading strategies such as slowing down the reading to gain a better understanding of the text, visualizing the information while reading, repeating the reading processes, and guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words. Another researcher, Fitriasia, Tan, and Yusuf (2015), proposing another model of reading strategies by knowing the reading purposes, applying the previous knowledge, previewing, evaluating the contents in contrast to reading objective, skimming the text, skipping unnecessary parts, using contextual hints, stop and think, checked the guessing, taking the note, reading aloud, summarizing texts, and discussing with other students, underlining or circling, using referencing, paraphrasing and keep asking a question about the context of the text.

On the other hand, Helen and Greenleaf (2007) mentioned the reading strategies that should be used in pre-reading activities (e.g., reviewing vocabulary, making predictions, and identifying text features), during reading activities (e.g., drawing visual representation, identifying arguments, asking questions), and post-reading strategies (e.g., summarizing, comparison). Grabe and Stoller (2002) found some examples of reading strategies: specify the purpose for reading, plan what to do/ what steps to take, preview the text, predict the content of the text or section of the text, check predictions, ask questions about the text, find answers to asked questions, connect text to background knowledge, summarise information, connect one part of the text to another, pay attention to text structure, reread all or parts of the text, guess the meaning of a new word of the context, use discourse markers to see relationships, check comprehension, identify comprehension difficulties, take steps to repair faulty comprehension, critique the author, judge how well objectives were met and reflect on what has been learned from the text. These suggestions of reading strategies might be applied whether the purpose of reading is both for academic and entertainment purposes.

However, despite much knowledge about the reading strategies, it is also important to emphasize the benefits and the procedures to apply these reading strategies. Paris et al., (1984) stated that readers will not apply reading strategies if they do not understand the value of reason for doing so. The goal of teaching reading strategies is not only to make students know the proper reading strategies, but they must be clever enough to apply different strategies in different reading text genres and monitoring the use of the strategies to develop their reading comprehension skills (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). Another problem that Indonesian students faced is that sometimes teachers do not teach the reading strategies, or they have taught the reading strategies whereas the students did not know how and when to implement the strategies concerning their use of metacognition when reading a text (Fitriasia, Tan, & Yusuf, 2015). It is also important to emphasize that different strategies might be used based on different reading texts and in different contexts whether it is used for different purposes of reading (Carrell, 1998; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Sutherland-Smith, 2002).

To conclude, it is very important for Indonesian secondary students' to be taught about the importance and the benefits of applying the proper reading strategies while they are given the reading text materials. The benefits of applying

one of the strategies might be different depends on the reading text genre. If the students know, understand, and are clever enough to apply the proper reading strategies, it might help them to gain better reading comprehension skills.

#### 4. Conclusion

This essay has discussed students' motivation, the awareness of reading text genre, and implementing the proper reading strategies as the solutions to enhance Indonesian secondary students' reading comprehension skills. The students will gain better reading comprehension skills if they can apply both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as the purpose of reading is not only limited to academic purposes but can be used for entertainment purposes. Another important thing to know is that reading comprehension skills will be useful for a lifetime not merely to gain a better understanding of reading academic text to get the best score in the national standardized exam or general school assignments.

The awareness of reading text genre can be taught by a teacher and learned by students as skills to gain a better understanding of reading materials given. The purpose of being aware of text genre can be useful for students to produce better quality assignments given by the teacher meanwhile it can be used to enhance other important English language skills such as writing. By being taught about the importance and the benefits of reading strategies, students are expected to be clever enough to choose and to implement the proper reading strategies depending on the reading text (academic or non-academic) given.

This essay suggests several implications for researchers, teachers, and students with study about improving English reading comprehension skills in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language. For researchers, this essay fills the gap among the studies on reading comprehension skills. It also contributes to providing new insights about reading comprehension skills in the use for daily life not just for academic purposes. For teachers who teach English as Foreign Language, this study can be useful guidelines to teach about reading strategies, choosing the suitable reading text genre, and knowing about students' motivation to get students more engaged in the reading lessons and get better achievements in school reading assignments or nationalized standardized test. For secondary students, who learn English as Foreign Language, this study can be useful guidance to help them enhance their reading comprehension skills. Furthermore, students might be able to implement these solutions not only just to get a better score in school reading assignments or nationalized standardized tests, but in the reading for entertainment purposes in daily life.

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