



Examining the Reading Performance and Problems among Students in Indonesian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of the study are to assess the students' reading performance and explore their problems in comprehending English texts. To achieve these objectives, a descriptive research design was employed. The participants consisted of 76 English Department students from the Faculty of Teachers Training and Education at Universitas Sulawesi Barat, Majene, Indonesia. Two instruments were used in this study. First, a test was administered to measure students' reading performance. Second, a questionnaire in the form of a Google Form was employed to gather students' self-reported responses regarding their problems and difficulties in reading English texts. The findings revealed that the students' mean score on the reading performance test was 47.24, indicating a relatively low reading performance among the students. Moreover, the questionnaire responses indicated that most students reported encountering problems and difficulties in comprehending English reading texts. Consequently, it can be inferred that students' reading performance is adversely affected by these challenges. Based on the results, this study recommends the integration of learning media, technological tools, and effective reading strategies to address the identified problems and improve students' reading skills. These practical recommendations aim to provide educators and researchers with actionable strategies to improve the reading proficiency of EFL students.

Keywords: Reading Performance, Reading Problems, English Reading Text

INTRODUCTION

Having strong reading skills in the English language is a major asset for anyone trying to improve their fluency and proficiency in the language. Reading English materials can help individuals to develop a rich vocabulary, comprehend complex sentence structures, and improve their overall understanding of the language. By reading widely in English,

individuals can also enhance their critical thinking, analytical abilities, and communication skills both in written and oral form. Moreover, reading in English can expose individuals to different cultures and viewpoints, which is especially important in our increasingly interconnected world. Developing strong reading skills in English can also open up more job opportunities since English is widely used in

global business and commerce. Therefore, improving one's reading skills in English can be a valuable investment for anyone who wants to excel in their personal or professional life.

Reading is defined as an active process where the reader, as well as the texts, work together to build meaning (Par, 2020). Moreover, Evenddy et al. (2021) stated that reading is an active process of understanding written language by moving the readers' eyes and bringing new ideas and information into their minds. It is also explained as a mental process where the reader uses personal experience and knowledge to make sense of what they're reading (Rizqon et al., 2021; Suryani, 2022), so it is possible that someone cannot understand the text if they do not have sufficient background knowledge. In addition, Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016b) described that reading is a collaborative activity in which the reader uses specific techniques to form an internal representation of the text. In sum, reading is defined as the process by which the reader takes and gets information from the text.

Reading is an essential ability for language study. Suryani (2022) said that reading represents one of the important language skills to attain in learning at the primary to university level, along with listening, speaking, and writing, since the four language skills are interrelated. Meanwhile, reading seems to be more essential than some other skills to English language learners in the world, particularly those studying English as a second/foreign language (Grabe

cited in Rungsinanont, 2020). In addition, reading can improve students' vocabulary and communication skills; learn and expand vocabulary, enable people to communicate with others and share ideas through text, and help to comprehend the text's content. Reading is essential for a successful language career and should be part of everyone's daily learning routine.

When people read, they need to comprehend what they are reading. It is related to reading comprehension. Reading is categorized as a receptive skill in learning English, so it requires comprehension. Evenddy et al. (2021) said that reading comprehension refers to the process of getting information from a particular text and then constructing meaning from a previously conveyed thought. Reading comprehension is also described as the ability to understand and draw a conclusion from the text, it aids in the development of learners' knowledge, ability, and memory in preparation for real-world challenges (Rizqon et al., 2021). Furthermore, (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016a) argued that reading comprehension requires various reading skills, including memorizing vocabulary, fluency, lexicon understanding, and prior knowledge, to be executed rapidly for the reader to obtain information from a text. In addition, among the most crucial transferable abilities for succeeding in school and life is the ability to comprehend what one reads (Calet et al. cited in Suryani, 2022).

Considering the importance of reading comprehension, this leads some researchers to investigate the issues, challenges, and problems in reading comprehension. First, Torabi & Maleki (2022) explored the problems with reading comprehension among Iranian EFL students and some solutions suggested by students. Findings showed that participants' difficulties with reading comprehension included word knowledge, textual origination, grammatical, time constraints, and anxiousness. Learners proposed four solutions, such as practicing vocabulary and grammar more, helping worried learners, and giving learners more time to read. Second, Suryani (2022) investigated the problems faced in reading. This study found most students missed reading comprehension examinations because they lacked vocabulary, had a low grammatical ability, had trouble understanding the material, the lack of learning media or family support, as well as a lack knowledge regarding reading comprehension.

Then, Fesi & Mncube (2021) explored the difficulties encountered by teachers in East London, South Africa, during teaching reading to fourth-grade students. The key findings are the low reading proficiency of fourth grade EFAL students, a decline in teacher and student motivation, large classes, and insufficient reading teaching methods. Next, Hammad (2021) investigated the problems in the reading parts of the TOEFL Internet and paper tests among Palestinian college-level students. The results revealed the issues the students faced

during the reading parts, including the tests' topics being unrelated to the participants' content prior knowledge, limited exposure to long and complex passages, having a slow reading pace, and lack of language skills. Further, Al-Jarf (2021a, 2021b) found that students' reading comprehension problems included understanding the main ideas, topics, details, and text structure. It is also difficult to make inferences and figure out the meanings of words.

Also, Rungsinanont (2020) said that anxiety and word recognition are the most significant contributing factors to students' reading comprehension skills. Other characteristics that affected reading ability included attitudes, overly lengthy and complicated sentences, difficulties in learning vocabulary and information, English reading strategies, previous knowledge, willingness to read (Isma & Baharuddin, 2022), and interesting content. The problems students face in reading are all as follows: the word is hard; they are not able to translate; they are too lethargic to read; they misinterpret the topic; articles are complicated; articles contain an excessive number of pages; students are disinterested in reading. In addition, Dumlaio et al. (2019) noted that some issues and challenges in reading English text included not being familiar with the terms in the text, not having phonological and linguistic awareness, as well as feeling anxious among both teachers and classmates. In sum, some of the most common problems found are

(1) lack of mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and language skills, (2) lack of understanding of content, main ideas, and topics in the text, (3) anxiety, and lack of motivation and interest in reading, (4) and other technical problems such as length of reading text, limited time, lack of using learning media and reading strategies.

Considering the information presented above, the researchers are concerned with exploring the students' reading performance as well as the students' problems in reading English texts in different contexts at the Indonesian university level. Therefore, the research questions formulated are (1) to what extent are the students' reading performances in reading text? and (2) what are the most common problems students face when reading text? The findings are expected to contribute to English language teaching and learning in the Indonesian EFL context as well as in other contexts. This study provides an overview of students' reading situations in the EFL context and recommends the use of learning media, technological tools, and reading strategies to overcome these problems and improve students' reading skills.

METHODS

This study used a descriptive research design to achieve its objectives of describing students' reading performance and problems. The research was conducted at Universitas Sulawesi Barat with a sample of 76 students from the English Department, Faculty of

Teachers Training and Education, who were enrolled in reading courses.

Data collection involved the use of two main instruments, namely a test and a questionnaire. The test consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions designed to assess students' reading performance. Students were required to answer questions based on the text they had read. Additionally, a questionnaire was administered to gather information on students' responses to problems and difficulties encountered during reading. The questionnaire included a combination of seven multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question. The multiple-choice questions utilized a specified scale (always, often, rarely, never), while the open-ended question allowed students to write down their most frequently experienced problems in reading texts.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically calculating mean scores, to summarize and interpret the test results. Thematic analysis was employed to identify common themes and patterns in the open-ended responses from the questionnaire. The findings were then presented in tables, diagrams, and narrative descriptions to provide a comprehensive overview of the research findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part describes the findings of the research to answer research questions about the extent of students' reading performance and what problems students face in reading text.

Students' Reading Performance in the Reading Text

A reading test is used to find out the data related to students' reading performance. The findings are then classified based on the categories and interval scores, which are presented as follows:

Table 1. The Frequency and Percentage of Students' Reading Scores

No	Category	Interval Score	Reading Score	
			F	%
1	Very Good	85-100	3	3,95
2	Good	70-84	18	23,68
3	Fair	50-69	14	18,42
4	Poor	40-49	13	17,11
5	Very Poor	<40	28	36,84
Total			76	100

The table above shows the frequency and percentage of students reading scores. After giving a reading test to 76 students, it was found that there were 3 (3,95) students scored 85-100 in the very good category, 18 (23,68%) students scored 70-84 in the good category, 14 (18,42%) students scored 50-69 in the fair category, 13 (17,11%) students scored 40-49 in the poor category, and 28 (36,84%) students scored below 40 in the very poor category. The illustration of students' scores can be presented in the following chart:

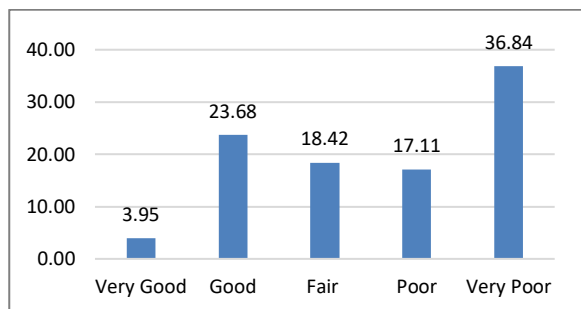


Figure 1. The Percentage of Students' Reading Scores

This shows that the very poor category has the highest frequency and percentage (36,84%). It was followed by the good category (23,68%). The next is the fair category (18,42%) and the poor category (17,11%). The last and the lowest was the very good category (3,95%). This means that the poor categories (poor and very poor) are more dominant than the good categories (good and very good), which indicates that most students have poor scores on the reading test.

Students' Reading Scores: Mean and Standard Deviation

Based on descriptive analysis, the following table describes the students' reading scores, including the mean score as well as the standard deviation:

Table 2. The Calculation of Mean Score and Standard Deviation

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Hasil Tes (X1)	76	47,24	23,87
Valid N (listwise)	76		

The data presented in the table above describes that the mean score of students' reading scores is 47,24 with a standard deviation of 23,87, which means it is in the poor category according to the range of students reading scores. The conclusion is that students' reading performance is still low.

This result is in line with previous research findings (Alek, 2019; Bensalem, 2020; Do & Phan, 2021; Fesi & Mncube, 2021; Rizqon et al., 2021; Rungsinanont, 2020; Savaşçı & Akyel, 2022; Suryani, 2022), which showed that there

were students who had low reading skills in several English language learning contexts. Furthermore, the findings can be used as a point of reference by other researchers who want to investigate how to help students improve their reading skills by using various learning media

and today's technological tools in the same or different contexts.

Students' Reading Problems and Difficulties

A questionnaire is used to identify students' responses to problems and difficulties encountered in reading the text. The findings are presented as follows:

Table 3. The Frequency and Percentage of Students' Reading Problems and Difficulties

Items	Questions	Rating Scale							
		Never		Rarely		Often		Always	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Based on my experience in doing reading tests, I have problems and difficulties in: [finding out detailed information in the text]	2	2,63	18	23,68	39	51,32	17	22,37
2	Based on my experience in doing reading tests, I have problems and difficulties in: [finding the main idea in the text]	4	5,26	21	27,63	31	40,79	20	26,32
3	Based on my experience in doing reading tests, I have problems and difficulties in: [describing references]	4	5,26	28	36,84	30	39,47	14	18,42
4	Based on my experience in doing reading tests, I have problems and difficulties in: [finding out the sequence of the text]	5	6,58	18	23,68	38	50	15	19,74
5	Based on my experience in doing reading tests, I have problems and difficulties in: [finding out the cause-effect in the text]	3	3,95	24	31,58	32	42,11	17	22,37
6	Based on my experience in doing reading tests, I have problems and difficulties in: [finding out the inference of the text]	1	1,32	23	30,26	35	46,05	17	22,37
7	Based on my experience in doing reading tests, I have problems and difficulties in: [understanding the word meanings and terminology in the text]	2	2,63	22	28,95	38	50	14	18,42

The table above shows the frequency and percentage of students reading problems and difficulties. All questions in the questionnaire were responded to by 76 students based on the rating scale (never, rarely, often, and always). The results showed that there were 2 (2,63%) students who responded never, 18 (23,68%) students responded rarely, 39 (51,32%) students responded often, and 17 (22,37%) responded

always for **item 1**. This shows that most students responded often, which means that they tend to have problems **finding detailed information in the text**.

In **item 2**, 4 (5,26%) students chose never, 21 (27,63%) students chose rarely, 31 (40,79%) students chose often, and 20 (26,32%) chose always. This shows that most students chose often, which means that they tend to have

problems **finding the main idea of the text**. In **item 3**, 4 (5,26%) students answered never, 28 (36,84%) students answered rarely, 30 (39,47%) students answered often, and 14 (18,42%) answered always. This shows that most students answered often, which means that they tend to have problems **describing references**. In **item 4**, 5 (6,58%) students selected never, 18 (23,68%) students selected rarely, 38 (50%) students selected often, and 15 (19,74%) selected always. This shows that most students selected often, which means that they tend to have problems **finding out the sequence in the text**.

In **item 5**, 3 (3,95%) students said never, 24 (31,58%) students said rarely, 32 (42,11%) students said often, and 17 (22,37%) said always. This shows that most students said often, which

means that they tend to have problems **finding out the cause-effect in the text**. In **item 6**, 1 (1,32%) student replied never, 23 (30,26%) students replied rarely, 35 (46,05%) students replied often, and 17 (22,37%) replied always. This shows that most students replied often, which means that they tend to have problems **finding out the inference of the text**. In **item 7**, 2 (2,63%) students stated never, 22 (28,95%) students stated rarely, 38 (50%) students stated often, and 14 (18,42%) stated always. This shows that most students stated often, which means that they tend to have problems **understanding the words meanings in the text**. The illustration of students' responses can be seen in the following chart:

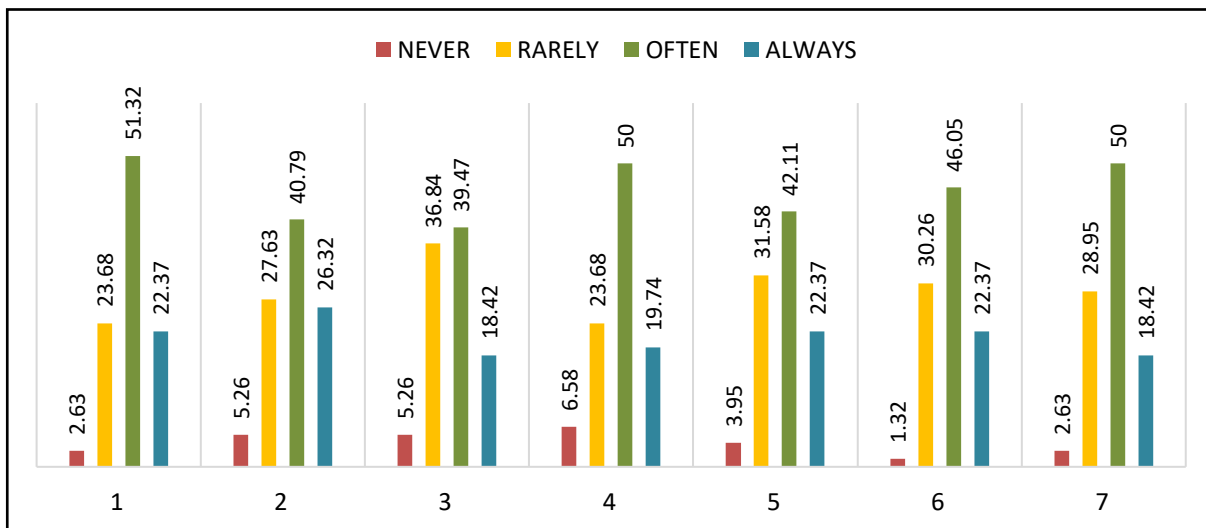


Figure 2. The Percentage of Students' Reading Problems and Difficulties

This shows the same trends in responding to all questions in the questionnaire. It is found that the "often" response has the highest frequency and percentage compared to others, ranging from 39,47% to 51,32%. It is followed by

the "rarely" response (23,68% to 36,84%). The next is the "always" response (18,42% to 26,32%). The lowest is the "never" response (1,32% to 6,58%). It is also noted that most students responded "often" to all questions,

which indicates that students tend to have a lot of problems related to questionnaire items.

The results of this questionnaire are also strengthened by the results of the open-ended

question responses, which show some of the problems and difficulties faced by students, which can be seen as follows:

Table 4. The Responses of Students to the Open-ended Questionnaire

<i>I think the problem I faced in reading tests was the lack of vocabulary, I sometimes could not understand what words or the sentence mean</i>
<i>Sometimes I forget the meaning of English vocabulary when reading so that I can't understand the text's meaning</i>
<i>I don't have the motivation and interest to read English text</i>
<i>I feel difficulty translating into Indonesia, so if I do the reading text or questions, it will take a long time, and it is hard for me to find out the right answers</i>
<i>The text is too long, it is difficult to answer the questions</i>
<i>Sometimes it is difficult for me understanding the content in the text</i>
<i>I am difficult to comprehend the content</i>
<i>I am difficult to see the detailed information</i>
<i>Sometimes I don't understand the content of the text when it is too long, I also get bored if the text is too long</i>
<i>I cannot understand the content of the text because lack of vocabulary</i>
<i>I lack interest in reading long texts</i>
<i>I have difficulties getting the main idea in the text</i>
<i>I am lazy to read the long text</i>
<i>I have difficulty determining inferences and ideas from the text</i>
<i>I usually get confused to determine the synonyms and antonyms of words in sentences</i>
<i>Sometimes I lost my concentration while reading the text</i>
<i>I am difficult to understand the grammatical structure of the reading text</i>
<i>I am often confused to find the meaning of a word</i>

The table above shows that most students have problems and difficulties in comprehending the text because of a lack of vocabulary mastery. In addition, students also have difficulty understanding the content and finding the main ideas, detailed information, and inferences in the text. The other factors that were revealed

included: a lack of motivation and interest in reading texts; reading texts that were considered too long and boring; lack of concentration; and poor grammar mastery. The findings of this study support the previous findings as described in the introduction that the most common problems found are (1) lack of

mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and language skills, (2) lack of understanding of content, main ideas, and topics in the text, (3) anxiety, and lack of motivation and interest in reading, (4) and other technical problems such as length of reading text, limited time, lack of using learning media and reading strategies.

Due to those problems and difficulties, it is necessary to review some previous related studies regarding the possible reading strategies and their advantages that can be used to overcome the problems and improve reading skills. First, Ayu (2021) found that Text Features Walks can dramatically increase students' reading performance compared with those who do not participate. In addition, the students chose group collaboration as the most effective method for enhancing their knowledge during the learning process. Consequently, Text Features Walks had a positive impact on students' reading skills. Second, Fesi & Mncube (2021) found that reading aloud helps to enhance the reading achievement of students. The exposure of students to reading methods will equip students for success in all reading and writing assignments. As a result of increased self-efficacy and reading motivation, students will feel better equipped to engage in more challenging reading assignments. Third, Thongwichit & Buripakdi (2021) found the students' views toward teaching metacognitive reading strategies showed positive results. Findings recommended that metacognitive strategies can be incorporated not just into

English reading courses but also into other courses that include reading activities, to improve students' reading skills and comprehension.

Next, Al-Jarf (2021b) found that the mind-mapping program helped freshmen EFL students better understand what they read. Both mind mapping and English reading texts were viewed favorably by the students. In addition to assisting with text comprehension and ideas organization, students stated the mind-mapping program to be entertaining. Then, Olaya & González-González (2020) suggested that working together has a greater impact on students' reading comprehension skills. Cooperative learning improves English reading abilities while also developing leadership, decisions making, communication, and problem-solving skills. It also promotes students' participation, enthusiasm, and target achievement in the process of language learning. Furthermore, Alek (2019) found that the students' performances have improved from the pre-action exam through the first and second cycles, trending toward the positive and ending at a good level. To sum up, the Problem-Based Learning model's use with college English as a foreign language student is successful in fostering students' development in their ability to read and comprehend English discourse.

In addition, integrating ICT into education is necessary to meet educational needs and involves changes in teaching and learning methods, requiring teachers to be equipped to

use technology effectively (Isma et al., 2022). Using effective technology such as learning apps and game-based learning can enhance students' engagement, foster self-directed learning, and facilitate participation in the learning process (Isma et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the reading performance and problems of students in the Indonesian university context. The results of this study indicate that students' reading performance remains low, as evidenced by the mean score of 47.24 on the reading test, placing it in the poor category according to the range of students reading scores. Meanwhile, the questionnaire responses revealed that students often face problems and difficulties in comprehending English texts. The data from the frequency and percentage analysis of the questionnaire indicate that students face various challenges in reading comprehension, including finding detailed information, understanding the main idea, describing references, identifying the sequence, comprehending cause-effect relationships, making inferences, and understanding word meanings in the text. The analysis of the open-ended questionnaire responses reveals that students encounter specific obstacles in reading. These include a lack of vocabulary, difficulty understanding content and identifying main ideas, struggles with finding detailed information and making inferences, as well as issues with motivation, concentration,

and grammar mastery. This allows the conclusion that most students have low reading performance because they have a lot of problems and difficulties comprehending the English reading text. To address these challenges, this study recommends the integration of various learning media, technological tools, and effective reading strategies to enhance students' vocabulary acquisition, improve comprehension skills, and foster critical reading abilities. These recommendations offer practical strategies for educators and researchers working to enhance students' reading skills in similar or different contexts.

Future research should explore additional factors influencing students' reading performance, such as instructional methods, reading habits, and sociocultural influences. Investigating these areas will contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in improving reading skills among university students. Furthermore, researchers and educators should be aware of the limitations of this study, including potential biases, sample representativeness, and limitations associated with the data collection instruments. By recognizing these limitations and suggesting future research directions, this study contributes to the broader body of literature on reading skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context and provides a foundation for further investigations aimed at improving students' reading proficiency.

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