

# “AT LEAST, I HAVE TO REPEAT FIVE TIMES” FREQUENT READING DIFFICULTIES

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## Abstract

PISA's result in 2016 shows that Indonesian country score in reading, 397, is still below PISA average score, 493. Although the rank increased, the below-average score denotes that the students are still less literate while reading is vital to all scholars. Most higher education students still encounter difficulties when reading, *per se* reading is profoundly essential in academes. This study is devoted to shed light on intrapersonal difficulties that higher students face in reading. Qualitative research method was employed involving 83 Economics students at Syiah Kuala University. The data collection process was carried out through questionnaire and interview procedures after which the data were analyzed using three-steps analysis. The result suggests that 91.5% of the students has difficulties in retention—where they tend to fail retrieving just-obtained information, discharge information found in passage(s) with prior knowledge, and cannot relate the information with real life experiences. Then 87% has comprehension difficulty where they are not optimally engaged while reading, confused with contextual meanings, main ideas and supporting details, and about what to expect from passage(s). Finally, 12% faces problems in decoding (regardless of Dyslexic symptoms) for which they still read word-by-word and occasionally despise punctuations. Generally, it leads to a discussion that problems in concentrating promote problems in memory-processing. The authors would gently suggest students to be trained to monitor and regulate their metacognitive ability during reading.

**Keywords:** *Reading Difficulties, Retention, Comprehension, Decoding, Memory-Processing.*

## INTRODUCTION

The ability of literacy is fundamentally based on reading ability. Reading ability does not merely emphasize the decoding process, but also the comprehension and information-recalling process. For that reason, most Indonesian students perceive that it is difficult to be a proficient reader. This proposition is supported by PISA's (2016) research on the Math, Reading, and Science ability of students in 70 countries worldwide which suggests that Indonesia is in the rank of 65 out of 70 countries (PISA, 2016). Particularly in reading, Indonesia's score is 397 which is under PISA's average score for Reading ability, 493. Whereas the ability to read is a highly valuable ability in both academic and non-academic lives as

reading opens gate to any knowledge and a means of communication through written discourses (Bond, et. Al., 1994).

On its nature, reading ability develops far earlier before school-year time. It has its start as soon as a child is learning to communicate through verbal language. Bond, et.al., (1994) further describe that firstly children learn to 'code' object within which only in a few years, they would be able to point on pictures on their books and name them. Of course, the pictures have to be familiar with the children so that the word-meaning association can be performed. Later in the school years, the pictures shift into alphabetical orders—words—and that is when children understand that the alphabets/words used in books are

representative to the author's ideas. at that point, reading ability is learned. So it is likely that when reading, the readers should also think; otherwise, the meaning-association process can never happen and this may lead to poor or incomplete comprehension. Normal reading undertakes several phases, i.e: prereading period, progress in reading readiness, introduction to reading, progress in the primary grades, progress in the basic reading abilities, and progress in the special reading abilities (Bond, et.al., 1994).

Most Indonesian readers, especially functional readers who refer to college students, still face numerous problems especially in employing special reading ability. This means that once the reading purpose is specified and elaborated in highly-complex written syntactic models, the readers get distracted from conveying the passage meanings. This process appears entirely different in spoken passages as there are idiosyncratic and formulaic speech in spoken discourse but not in written one. Collins & Haviland (1979) propose eight factors that lead to reading failure and they are as explained in the following.

Firstly, it is the modality cause which is different between spoken and written passages. Next, there is no interaction made between readers and writers during reading; then specificity of audience in where it is general in written passages. Later, it is progress in the basic reading abilities—where readers and the writers are not in the same place at the moment of passages being read. Another cause is temporal commonality which poses that readers and the writers are not together at the same time at the moment of reading. Extra-linguistics features also matters, for example gestures and facial

expressions; referents concreteness where in written passages readers cannot literally see the referents that the writers suggest; and finally, it is the issue of separability of characters. for example, when speaking, if the listener is not really sure about what the speaker is saying, she/he can align the speech context to the speaker, but this is utmost improbable in written texts.

Academic reading, which is more intricated than any other academic fulfilments, relies solely on cognitive ability. in other words, readers with good attention, working memory, auditory processing, and visual processing can perform much better while reading (Bryan, 2013). Attention is basic in reading. A person who is lacking attention would find it difficult to comprehend the passage. Furthermore, working memory refers to internal processes that take place whilst reading such as short and long term processing, speed processing, and logic and reasoning. Lastly, both auditory and visual processing are also essential in reading due to the decoding process which apparently promotes the fact that readers first see the alphabetical symbols and then certain phonemes pop out in mind. As soon as these two are understood, the meaning can be retrieved (Woodcock, 2011).

Denton (2010) proposes that the key to dissolve reading difficulties is the instructions. There are three kinds of instruction that she further explains. The initial one is quality-class reading. So teachers need to provide secure environment as well as give students instruction based on their ability level. Secondly, it is by having systematic and intensive instruction which can be done several times in a week. Finally, to run the instruction on the daily basis. This chain of instruction have raised students (Dyslexic

ones) gradually. It is implied that when working with non-Dyslexic adult students, the instructions would be even a lot easier.

A number of research has depicted numerous causes, effects and even solutions for students with reading difficulties. This article is particularly formulated to find answer(s) on reading difficulties frequently faced by university students—who have to deal with purposive academic readings on the regular basis—in Aceh, Indonesia. Theoretically, this study is seen to be capable of embedding new finding(s) about Acehnese-college students' (majoring in Economics) reading obstacles. Practically, reading instructors need to be informed about re-configure their teaching approaches used in reading classes, especially the ones for specific academic purposes.

Some previous studies were conducted by several researchers as narrated below. The first one is a study by Hartney (2011) which sought the factors that led to difficulties faced in reading by the third graders at a primary school in the Khomas Education Region, Namibia. The mix-method of research design was applied through reading test and interviews with teachers and parent during the data collection process. The results showed that one of the factor causing difficulties in reading is lacking of exposure and this becomes a blockade for writing—as reading and writing are seen in the same position in this study. The second problem was that the classes were too crowded. Then, the factor of books provision was also a problem. And the last factor is that most students did not attend kindergarten that caused their literary skill underdeveloped. Another similar study was

also conducted in a Namibian primary school by Mule (2014).

And similar results were also gained. Factors that caused students face reading difficulties are material insufficiency and ineffective teaching methods for reading. Lastly, a study by Smentin & Maniam (2015) which was investigating the strategies employed by Malaysian students in overcoming reading difficulties that they face. This mix-method study used questionnaires and interviews to gather data. It involved 90 students at SMK Kapit. The findings suggest that most respondents translated from L1 to target language as they read, and the application of metacognitive strategies in reading was only in medium level.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative case study employed within three-weeks of data collection process. There were 84 university students who majored in Economics involved as the participants. They were supposed to answer 14 questions on the questionnaire set extrapolated into three elements in reading difficulty: decoding, comprehension, and retention. Besides, semi-structured interviews were also conducted to assure the data triangulation of the questionnaire responses.

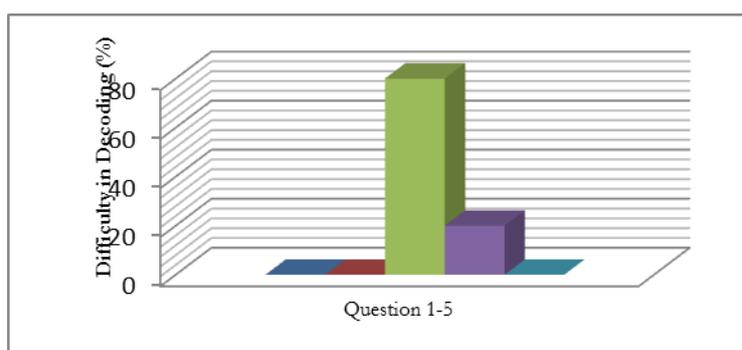
Regarding the questions in the questionnaire set, they are provided in the table below. The premises were in Bahasa Indonesia when distributed to the respondents and they had to respond either yes or no.

	Premise
<b>Decoding</b>	I have difficulties in sounding the phoneme and the symbol of a certain word synchronically.
	I have difficulties in differentiating between the phoneme and the symbol of a certain word.
	I read word by word.
	I cannot read with the involvement of expressions.
	I despise punctuations when I read.
<b>Comprehension</b>	I have difficulties in complying with word-meaning in a sentence.
	I have difficulties in associating ideas in a passage.
	Suppose there is a detail information that I cannot connect with, I would likely to skip it.
	I have difficulties in differentiating main ideas and supporting ideas.
	I frequently think of other things while reading.
<b>Retention</b>	I have difficulties in recalling an amount of information that I just read, especially longer texts.
	I have difficulties in associating the information contained in the text with my background knowledge.
	I have difficulties in associating the information contained in the text with the information I perceive in real life.

Concerning data analysis, the three-steps analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013) was used. In the first step, it is data reduction where the relevant data are sorted to fit in the research problem formulated earlier. Secondly, in data display step, the data are arranged into tables and graphs to clearly see and interpret what is conceived. Finally, it is data verification, which is the step where conclusion(s) are drawn over the findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In attempt of questionnaire result data provision, below is the table presenting the percentage of difficulties that are frequently faced by students at Economics major Syiah Kuala University in Aceh, Indonesia in Decoding while reading



**Figure 1.** Percentage of Difficulties in Decoding

The graph above shows the percentage of those who have problem in decoding process. In decoding process, readers match a phoneme's sound with its grapheme. This ability requires knowledge about differentiating between phonemes and graphemes, for instance, grapheme "d"

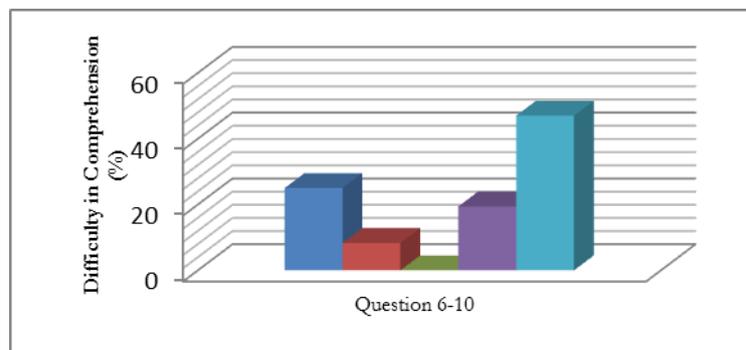
produces phoneme /d/. Besides, patterns in English are not the easy ones to remember (Moats, 2005). Those who are suffered from Dyslexia cannot make any distinctive clear-cuts between these two linguistic elements. However, from the respondents

participated in this study, there are none of them who informed of such inability.

The problem they majorly in face in decoding process is, when reading, they tend to do word-by-word reading to assure they understand the meaning. Eight participants were having the difficulty in decoding as they read per word. The root problem leading to this kind of reading is lackness of vocabulary. When a reader is uninformed about a certain vocabulary, she/he will miss the meaning and this affects the whole comprehension. This is supported by Froese (1977) who states that word-by-word reading indicates the

lackness of both vocabulary and comprehension.

Furthermore, word-by-word reading shows that the readers are struggling meanings as stated by Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs (2008) because it is not every eloquent reader can catch the word meaning sharply and quickly all at once. In addition, other two participants have difficulty in involving expressions while reading, and the other have no problems at all in decoding process. Next, below is provided a graph showing percentage of difficulties faced in comprehension during reading.



**Figure 2.** Percentage of Difficulties in Comprehension

The difficulties faced in Comprehension issues are drawn in the graph above. Most of the participant, 34 participants, deal with concentration problems as they mostly think about something else in the middle of their reading, or they get easily distracted. Eighteen of them have problem associating literal word meaning with sentential meaning. Then, 14 participants deal with the intricacy of sentential meaning to textual meaning. The least problems is when finding details that only 6 of them who skipped the detail left unfigured out; and none of them have problems in differentiating between main ideas and supporting ideas.

Dealing with problems in comprehension also indicates a reading disability as mentioned by Lundberg & Hoen (2001) and by Mather & Goldstein (2001) in Wawryck-Epp, Harrison, & Prentice (2004). From the interview (transcribed in the following), a participant informed that if it is a text written in English, the ideal reading to make him moderately understand is five times. Even if it is in Bahasa Indonesia, when it is an academic topic, several re-readings are still needed.

**Participant:** *Gak langsung ngerti, Ms. Saya biasanya baca minimal lima kali kalau bahannya bahasa Inggris. Kalau bahasa Indonesia juga sama, Ms. Tapi dua atau tiga*

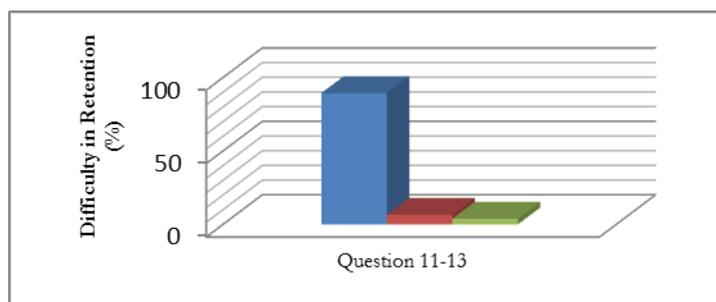
*kali uda paham apa maksudnya [(I) don't understand (the text) immediately, Ms. I usually have to repeat at least five times if the material is in English. If it is in Bahasa Indonesia, it is the same actually, Ms. But (if it is in Bahasa Indonesia, I only read) twice or three times and I understand it].*

Comprehension issue, in general, is in regard of cognitive problems which readers face during their engaged reading time. First, being resistant to disruptions is a big challenge for some readers. Bond *et.al* (1994) underpin that successful readers are those who can remain concentrated and can stand the noise while reading. Bond *et.al* (1994) further add, besides concentration problems, those with cognitive and intelligence issue can also have difficulty in acquiring, structuring, and applying knowledge. This explains why 14 participants find it difficult to structure word meanings into sentence meanings, as well as sentence meanings to textual meanings. Besides, for less-skilled readers, sequencing has also been identified as a problem, but they are better at spatial ability.

A reader has to read on their own willingness to understand the reading, especially academic readings which are considered hard and boring. So that, the failure in comprehension comes from the uninterestedness of the readers toward the reading materials. As one of the participant mentioned as in the following,

**Participant:** *bacaan yang dikasi dosen itu emang semuanya gak enak, Ms. Kami siap baca pun gak ngerti, yang ngerti judulnya aja (laughing). Yang bahasa Indonesia juga gitu, Ms. Agak lebih mudah, sih, dibanding yang bahasa Inggris. Tapi tetap aja kalau membaca bahan pelajaran tu gak enak. [the reading materials given by our lecturers are not interesting, Ms. We don't even understand after we read, we only understand the title (laughing). The one in Bahasa Indonesia (their L1) is also like that, Ms. Indeed it is easier compared to English materials. However, reading subject material (academic readings) is not interesting].*

From the transcription above, it is clear that most participants do not have any interest in reading academic materials. This is what leads them to failure when trying to comprehend the materials. Even when they are forced to do so, there is no guarantee they will understand what they read. As a suggestion, one way to improve their interest in reading, especially academic readings, is to let them pick the materials as they wish from various contexts. As the process continues, they can be assigned to more complex materials. Indeed, as inserted by Grajo & Candler (2014), reading is a skill where ample of practices are needed to justify cognitively and behaviorally. Finally, the following data display suggest the percentage of students who deal with retention problems in their readings.



**Figure 3.** Percentage of Difficulties in Retention

Figure 3 above depicts the percentages of the participants encountering problems in Retention. Dominant difficulty is in the issue of Recalling. Sixty eight participants cannot recall all details in the text they just read. From the interview, it was informed that they can locate the details but cannot remember them. So they have to reread to make sure the answer of the questions that follow. This result implies the participants' inability to posit a big picture of the passages they have read. Organizing the highlights and the supporting details might really help them to retain information during reading. This strategies also needs practice since the participants do not have time to write the passage organizations during the test.

While 5 others find it difficult to relate their background knowledge with the facts on the text. And finally, the other three participants cannot associate the facts they find in the texts with the information they acknowledge in real life. From the interview, one of the participants informed as in the following,

**Participant:** *Saya pernah baca satu teks dalam tes TOEFL. Teksnya tentang Penumoniam. Definisi yang dikasih disitu aneh, Ms. Lain dengan yang pernah saya baca sebelumnya. Jadi kalau kek gitu, kan makin susah saya jawab soal, Ms. Karena apa yang saya pahami*

*gak sama dengan yang didalam teks. [I once read a text in the TOEFL test, Ms. The topic was about Pneumonia. The definition given in the text was unfamiliar, Ms. It was different from what I had read before. It makes the questions harder because what I understand is not the same with that of in the text].*

From the transcription above, what might be presumed is that this student could not see the idea he read in the text has the identical purpose with the text he had read before about Penumoniam. It is unlikely that the passage in TOEFL test give mistaken definition. The most likely is that this student to misunderstand the definition because he could not associate the facts he learned in real life with the facts he found in reading materials. However, since this student exemplified a text he found in a TOEFL test, there is another variable that comes intervening here, which is the feeling of frustration and anxiety. When readers feel a condition that is threatening for their well-being, they can neither concentrate nor acknowledge the facts in proper ways. And it obviously leads to reading difficulty (Hlaethwa, 2013).

## CONCLUSIONS

From the findings above, it is concluded that there are two most difficult problems the students struggle in reading.

The first one is retention for details, and the second one is comprehension. In retention, the students could hardly manage to remember all details they read; so when they finish their reading, they do not understand what to adjust about the materials. Then, in the part of comprehension, what seems to be the obstacle is concentrating and being resistant toward noise. This is most likely because of their rejection toward reading that leads to the predicate of less successful readers.

The implication of these findings shows that university students' interest in reading may keep declining as most students still do not get good strategies to develop their passion for reading. Students consider that reading the academic materials repeatedly is time-wasting, so that they would just browse the similar ideas from any online excerpts or articles they could find, which generates the habit of copy-pasting—especially when they have to write their own papers. One of several parties which seems to be in charge over this condition is language instructors who teach language skills—specifically speaking, reading. So, language instructors should develop more strategies in teaching reading, of course, complying with the students' learning styles and preferences.

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