

THE INSPECTION OF LABORIOUS MECHANICAL ASPECTS FOR EFL READERS

Moriyanti^{*1}, and Nyak Mutia Ismail²

¹SMPN 2 Muara Tiga, Pidie, Aceh, Indonesia, 24153

²Universitas Serambi Mekkah, Aceh, Indonesia, 23249

* Corresponding Author: moriyanti1@gmail.com

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ABSTRAK

As most students admitted that their problem in reading was mainly regarding vocabulary, the authors were drawn to a premise that there must be a stronger underpinning explanation leading to such comprehension gap in reading. This study aimed at finding out a specific root-problem faced by EFL learners when performing reading, which are the mechanic skills of reading. This study was conducted using qualitative approach – case study design. The respondents were 55 college students in Aceh, Indonesia who were sophomores in Economics and Business faculty. The data were collected from September-

December 2019. The data source was a weekly individual checklist based on the mechanical reading framework, namely: phonic-phonemic awareness-vocabulary-fluency-comprehension to find out which problem they repeatedly faced during the reading process. From 14 meetings, it was calculated that 54 students mostly faced fluency problem which means that they know the semantic and literal meaning of a certain word but struggle with the sense of the word. Later, the problem faced was comprehension which was faced by 20 students. Then, the problem of vocabulary was experienced by 16 students. And the least problem faced is phonemic problem which was faced by 1 student only.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is one major skill in language learning besides listening, speaking, and writing. It is considered as a receptive skill as those who read only receive information from the author(s) of the passage. However, as research in cognition has started to develop, it is found that reading is no longer considered as passive as it was once claimed to be (Bojovic, 2010; Smith, 1994). This is because when a person performs reading, his/her mind works out the ideas proposed in the passages that they read, weighs the facts, identifies the implications entailed, and grasps the big pictures of the whole context. More specifically, these processes which are known as comprehension process are what visible on the surface. As we dig deeper, there are other key factors that determine the process of reading comprehension as a whole. They are mechanic skills of reading. Cognitive process takes place when a person read as the information being absorbed and

processed. There are six cognitive processes that happen during reading; they are attention, perception, memory, language, learning, and higher reasoning (Pearson, 2009). The initial process is the fundamental stage of all process, which means that if a reader does not have his/her *attention* on the passage, it is impossible to have the following process to get through. Then, the *perception* starts to shape up and this happens virtually in a person's mind when he/she reads. The information that has been formed into a certain perception then being processes through the working *memory*. In this stage, if there is incomprehensible information, it will not be processed and it will surely be discarded. Language also plays vital roles in helping the reader's engaged with the reading material. We can briefly say that if the reader masters the *language*, then the information will all be learned (*learning*) and it is going to be meaningful. This is what raises an issue for EFL readers as they can misunderstand the passage, if the information is not learned after reading it. Last but not least, it is the case of *reasoning* that determines whether the comprehension is achieved or not. Apparently, these processes work interpedently and if one process is being suspended, the others may be discontinued as well leading to the comprehension failure (Bojovic, 2010).

The cognitive processes are pinpointed by much detailed factors which are known as mechanics of reading. They are phonic, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension. Indeed, these skills are very basic as they are the ones developed during the early phase of reading ability development for each individual; this means that everyone who is able to read must have these skills. However, as mentioned earlier, the case is definitely different for foreign language learners, especially in Indonesia. From most PISA results, Indonesia ranked mostly in the bottom part of the list, which brings us to the conclusion that the reading ability of Indonesian students is also low. When it comes to English reading, the trouble doubles: the students face vocabulary problem and they are not familiar with the rhetoric in English composition. Similarly, students in higher education institution also bear same mindset on reading. They are hardly interested in reading, both academic and non-academic reading (PISA, 2009).

There have been a lot of studies conducted on reading comprehension; however, the literature on mechanical aspects of reading is still rarely found. Some previous studies about mechanical reading are provided in this section. First, Yoshikawa & Yamashita (2014) have conducted study on finding out the relationship between phonemic awareness and reading comprehension among Japanese adult learners of English language. There were 71 undergraduate and graduate students involved in this study. For the data collection, they used phonemic awareness test, vocabulary test, decoding test, and reading comprehension test. The result unveiled that phonemic awareness have effects on reading comprehension as phonological and phonemic processing helps the comprehension process to take place. Second, it is a study by Mohammed (2014). The study targeted on surveying, understanding and clarifying the phonological awareness abilities with college students in the University of Zakho, Iraq. There were four degrees of phonological awareness are focused in the manuscript. They are word awareness, syllable awareness, onset-rhyme awareness, and sound awareness. Adhering to some showing guidance and practice, the participants were administrated to fifteen tests to evaluate various sorts of phonological awareness. Later, the data were analyzed using t-tests,

ANOVAs, and multiple comparison correlations. The result indicates that the participants made more noteworthy progress in their phonological awareness specifically in content words that will be highly contributive to their reading ability. Last, it is a study by Cotter (2012). This study tries to seek the correlation between fluency and reading comprehension because reading fluency can be used to incline the reading comprehension. As the participants, there were five students and one parent took part in the study. The students were given set of reading passage which they were read on weekly basis. At the end of school year, they were given a reading comprehension test. The result depicts that the repeated reading strategies promotes reading fluency and this ends up in the inclination of reading comprehension.

Reading as a cognitive process

Reading is, indeed, an interaction of identifying letters, words, and eventually sentences prompting appreciation worked from letter to word to interpret the sentence as a whole. However, reading has more than that. It involves deeper portrayal of cognitive and psychological process during the process of reaching understanding (Nation, 2005). Readers utilize their current background information to make prediction about the upcoming information in the content and about how to manipulate the freshly-retained information to decode the unfamiliar and unknown information (Rumelhart, 1980). This process is deployed by readers in communication with more perplexing meaning construction process. In any case, it is similarly certain that readers take part in reading to acquire information. Specifically speaking, for EFL learners, the main purpose of reading is to give academically related tasks residing in language subject. This purpose is deliberated toward reading comprehension because comprehension can manifest in various product completion such as questions, synopsis, or oral report (Bojovic, 2010).

Concerning to foreign language reading, readers commonly apply different reading strategies which are different from the ones they use when reading in their mother tongue language. Bouvet (2002) suggests that there are different parts of perception checking have been analyzed with a specific spotlight on critical thinking procedures. For EFL readers, it was indicated that the two different types of readers use different strategies. Proficient readers seemed to embrace strategic behavior as a strategy to effectively reach comprehension during their reading time. Their strategic behavior strategy can integrate cohesion in meaning construction. Meanwhile, less proficient readers frequently turned to utilizing procedures in a less beneficial way. The strategy used by less proficient readers are majorly disintegrative translation strategies (read and translate without consolidation) to construct meaning of the text sentences.

Mechanical Reading Aspects

Mechanical reading is seen as word by word reading and mostly performed only by children who are learning how to read ("When we talk", n.d). There are five elements of mechanical reading. They are phonic, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The aspects are as elaborated in the following.

First, it is phonic. Phonic is studying the connections among letters and the sounds they address. Phonics is also used to depict reading instruction showing the relevance

between sound and symbols. As students—commonly struggling reader students—are left behind in their reading process and do not comprehend their key abilities and ideas, their reading accomplishment as a whole is influenced. Struggling readers regularly invest significantly more energy stirring abilities portraying bottom-up strategies where they basically work on phonics abilities, message decoding, and later content reading. Since they are battling with these essential abilities, they are not well-trained readers, which consequently lead them not to achieve reading comprehension after the reading is finished (Van Viersen et al., 2018).

Second, it is phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the reading ability to identify, consider, and control the phonemes in words. This skill makes a reader understand that to achieve comprehension, words of language work together to generate meanings. Chapman (2003) alludes that this phase is the most significant level of phonological awareness, which is where an individual becomes aware about the word phonemes. Concerning the phonological awareness, it can further be separated into more segments, they are: to hear similar sounding word usage (differentiating homophones), word rhyme, word fractions, and word limits. There are two key parts of phonological awareness which are, first, the ability to fragment words into phonemes (segmenting); and second, the ability to unite phonemes into words (blending). These two processes have been considered really interesting in the research field of reading and spelling as they have also attracted the attention of not only teachers but also parents (Schmitterer & Schroeder, 2019). Fundamentally, phonological and phonemic awareness are both significant in figuring out how to read. However, phonemic awareness in general are more substantially considered by some scholars since it is more significance in figuring out how to procedural steps of learning how to read (Adams, 1990). For instance, children with phonemic awareness split up a word into phonemes to compose the word and to set up phonemes in their reading process. Later, they also have some information on letter-sound connections. This leads them to generate approximate articulation that is frequently being cross-checked with the context and cues during reading.

Third, it is vocabulary. Vocabulary is the entirety of the expressions of a language. One should realize words to convey meaning successfully. Vocabulary is essential in reading comprehension since the inadequacy of vocabulary leads to comprehension breakdown. Vocabulary expansion happens when both meaning and pronunciation of a word is stored in the memory. This storing process majorly occurs during speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Vocabulary determines the success at school and academic life, but unfortunately, not everyone has a wide range of vocabulary (Nicholson & Dymock, 2010). They further propose strategies that can be portrayed to enhance one's vocabulary ability, they are: reading vocabulary sources, teaching vocabulary, and getting actively engaged with the newly learned vocabulary. Lacking of vocabulary can make readers to struggle in their comprehension. Nilforoushan (2012) reasonably urges that vocabulary is the main part in language learning and language use since it is profoundly focal in supporting the process of language learning itself as a holistic process, and specifically in reading as a more definite process.

Fourth, it is fluency. Fluency is the reader's ability to read a text rapidly, precisely, and with appropriate articulation. Fluency gives an extension between word

acknowledgment and appreciation. This ability differs from one reader to another. It depends onto the reader's capacity to rapidly perceive words that have been adapted earlier, automatically (Paige, 2011). When a reader can decipher a word straightforwardly, the fluency and comprehension can be gained in a more immediate timing. However, struggling readers have problems with this skill as it has been claimed by LaBerge and Samuels (1974) that poor readers have poor decoding skills. This condition also induces them to spend more energy to decode words rather than to focus on reaching the comprehension. This can be tricked by generating word-reading automaticity so that they spend less energy of word-by-word reading and can allocate more time on achieving comprehension instead. Chard, Pikulski, & McDonagh (2006) affirm that Reading fluency connects decoding and comprehension. A reader who is still struggling with the uneven skill between decoding and comprehension will gradually have issues with comprehension. And she/he will eventually believe that it is hard to distinguish the passage part as a discourse counterpart of composed words and sentences composing it. Indeed, the juxtaposition of any causal connection between comprehension and fluency is still open to debate. As a matter of fact, LaBerge and Samuels (1974) assert that reading fluency is a common extension between decoding and comprehension which is portrayed by accentuating the skill of automatization. Hence, less energy but larger opportunity invests into the effort of entwining comprehension. Accordingly, Rasinski and Hoffman (2003) guarantee that the skill automatization and correct pronunciation as well as the prosody (rhythmic alternation between stressed and unstressed words) can significantly interweave to achieve comprehension.

Last, it is comprehension. Comprehension means assimilating what has been known with the newly learned information. Reading comprehension is the use of an ability that advanced for different purposes to another type of information. In this case, it is the use of oral and aural ability to comprehend the message conceived in written passages. In contrast to listening comprehension, reading is not something for which our minds have advanced. We need to perform the learning cycles as we carry on. On one hand, oral/aural comprehension appears to grow normally with negligible intentional intercession; on the other hand, reading comprehension is seriously demanding and requires purposeful instruction (Kirby, 2007).

Although these mechanical elements of reading are usually faced and performed by young readers when they start learning to read in their L1, similar condition happens when the foreign language readers attempt to read. These readers mostly still read word by word and ended up zoning out or misinterpreted the content. Comprehension is an out-of-reach product after reading because the time and energy are focally accumulated on word decoding and meaning construction effort (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974).

After reviewing literature on mechanics of reading, it was limitedly found any research on mechanics reading ability in adult learners (especially on higher level education students); meanwhile the authors see a potential solution in attempts to minimize problems in reading for EFL learners in Indonesia. So, that fact is seen as a gap to be filled and the authors are determined to study about the mechanics reading ability of higher level education students. Consequently, the problem formulated in this study is "What are the dominant mechanics reading issues faced by college students?"

RESEARCH METHOD

This study mainly employed case study model from qualitative approach. There was 55 second-year students of a university in Aceh, Indonesia. The instrument used was a checklist developed using Bormuth's (1966) theory on mechanical reading. The data collection process was carried out in September to December 2019. During the data collection, this checklist was distributed to all respondents who took TOEFL preparation class and they were supposed to tick the column in every single meeting after the performed the reading section to identify the specific problem(s) they faced. There were 14 meetings altogether with 90 minutes for each. They were supposed to tick the checklist at the end of each meeting. Later on, the data analysis was carried out using Interactive Analysis as suggested by Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2014). The steps of this analysis is data reduction—where all irrelevant data obtained during the study are reduced; data display—where the data are presented in the form scattered graph; and data verification—where the conclusion(s) are drawn and verified from the results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The result is provided in a scattered tabulation as shown below.

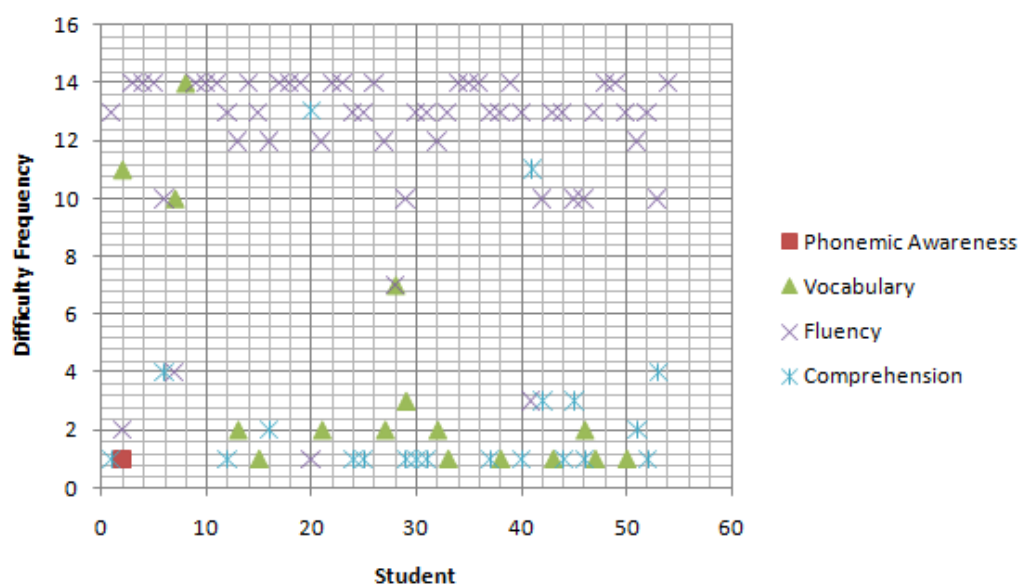


Figure 1. Results

The figure above shows that the major obstacle faced by the students was reading fluency. The average time for every respondent to face the fluency problem is 12.01 out of 14 (the total meetings in this study). This means that in 14 meetings, the chance to experience fluency problem in reading occurred in 12.01 meetings. In addition, this was experienced by 54 out of 55 students. As supported by Cotter (2012), the problem of fluency in reading happens because struggling readers are not familiar with the concept of reading itself. Low performance readers require a lot of help to stay away from a huge inconsistency in their learning. At the point when students are falling behind in their reading as the do not comprehend essential abilities and ideas, their general reading accomplishment is influenced. Low performance readers frequently invest significantly

more energy stirring abilities, implying that they work on phonics abilities, translating, and afterward rereading the text. As they are battling with these fundamental abilities, they are not familiar with the idea of comprehending, thus they hardly get the comprehension as soon as they finished reading. Consequently, they do not perform any fluency in their reading. Hence, they do not know what they have read. As the solution, modeled or guided reading can be really helpful for them.

Later, the students faced problems in vocabulary for 3.8 times which means that within 14 meetings, the chance to face problems in reading vocabulary is in 3.8 meetings. There were 16 students experiencing problems in vocabulary during reading. Afzal (2019) highlight several potential problems related to vocabulary in reading such as the meaning, the pronunciation, the spelling, the grammatical usage, and the cultural related context of a certain words. This case is generally faced by the students as they are not actively engaged in using English words despite their regular contacts with English words and their contexts.

Then, the problem in comprehension also occurred for 2.7 times—which means that within 14 meetings, the chance was 2.7 times. This was faced by 20 students. Indeed, comprehension was the key chore that the students needed to perform in a reading comprehension test. The strategy to achieve comprehension needs a person to relate between two or more information and make sense out of it. In addition, comprehension is not a one-step procedure that can be done by simply reading the word clusters in a text. As it is generally known that there are top-down and bottom-up processing in comprehension, struggling readers tend to perform top-down approach in their reading (Kirby, 2007). As they focused their attention on the words and phrases rather than the theme of the context, they may not be able to decode the essence of their reading afterwards as they finish. The over-focus they spend on the phrases (vocabulary) leads to less-focus spent on the idea embraced in the text (Ismail, 2017). Hence, their comprehension remains aloof.

Meanwhile the least problem faced is phonemic awareness, as it was only faced by 1 student in 1 meeting. Phonological and phonemic awareness are the basic reading ability developed at the early stage of learning process. This process is not only enclosed in reading, but also in speaking and listening. In this research, although the subjects are categorized as struggling readers, they are all second year students of university which means that almost definitely unlikely for them to experience problems in phonological and phonemic decoding.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

From the result above, it can be concluded that for struggling readers, the most substantive reading problem that they face is reading fluency, as there are 54 students experienced this problem. Later, the problem faced was comprehension which was faced by 20 students. Then, the problem of vocabulary was experienced by 16 students. And the least problem faced is phonemic problem which was faced by 1 student only.

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Biography:

Moriyanti was born in Lhokseumawe, November 10, 1990. Undergraduate education (S1) was taken at English Education Study Program at IAIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh in 2008. Then, she continued her Master's Degree in 2013 at the English Education Study Program, Syiah Kuala University, Banda Aceh. Currently, she is English teacher at SMPN 2 Muara Tiga, Pidie, Aceh. In addition, the author is active as English lecturer at the campus in Banda Aceh. Scientific articles have been published in local, national and international journals. Moreover, she is enthusiastic as a keynote speaker in the international conference event. Her research work can be accessed at <https://bit.ly/3z9YJNk>

Nyak Mutia Ismail is an English Department lecturer at the University of Serambi Mekkah, Aceh, Indonesia. She also teaches General English at Syiah Kuala University, Aceh, Indonesia. Additionally, she is also an instructor of TOEFL preparation (specifically Reading section) at the Language Center of Syiah Kuala University. She earned both her bachelor and master degree at Syiah Kuala University and now is highly interested in academic research and scholarly articles. She has presented her research papers in national and international conferences as well as has published her articles in various journals. Her research interests are English language teaching, educational assessment, and cognition in learning. Her research work can be accessed at <https://bit.ly/3PNgPvC>