Research Article

EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Level: What Do They Portray?

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ABSTRACT

Levelling reading comprehension may help students learning and teacher course designing. This study attempts to portray the level of EFL reading comprehension in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The participants were 78 EFL learners who were registered in the academic year 2020-2021. The data were collected through administering a set of adapted reading test and calculated based on the indicator of the scoring system and criteria. These data were classified into each level of reading comprehension which is described in the form of percentage and presented through diagram and chart. The major findings of this study reveal that: 1) there were 77 or (99%) participants can complete most of the literal test items and they just achieved literal level of comprehension of reading skill; 2) there were 24 or (31%) participants were able to answer all inferential test items successfully and they just reach inferential level of reading comprehension; and 3) there were 19 or (24%) participants can give their answer critically and they just obtained a critical level of reading comprehension. It is interpreted that numerous students were still in the position of the literal level which is regarded as a very low or basic level of reading comprehension. So, it is strongly recommended that EFL learners at Universitas Jambi require an intensive practice of reading to achieve a highest level of reading comprehension.

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INTRODUCTION

A process of communication between readers and author that has a direct cognitive relationship has become a major concept of Reading. It contains both psychomotor and cognitive element used by the readers to express their thought or ideas and to learn other skill or knowledge. For this reason, reading skill is necessary to achieve since it is the most essential part of many aspects to make readers open their mind and insight (Klemer, 2016; Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). In English teaching at college or university level, reading is taught to assist students to achieve certain goals and objectives. In this way, reading skill is regarded as a complex skill that can provide students with a good comprehension toward the written text. In addition, reading skill is the process of being able to comprehend a sentence, a paragraph, and the information included in a text as a whole. From several understandings of reading by several experts, it can conclude that reading is an activity to understand a text to get information.

In line with this, Romadhoni (2010) claimed that reading skill has actually been categorized into several levels of comprehension, (1) *Literal comprehension*, a very low or basic level of comprehension. Readers in this level can get

information from the text explicitly that includes detail of the text, pronoun and the sequence of story in the text. (2) *Inferential comprehension*, as an understanding of reorganization and inferential. Readers in this level are able to understand a definition between sentences implicitly and draw a conclusion from the texts. They also can find main ideas of the texts, causal relationship, pronoun and omitted words or expression in the texts. (3) *Critical comprehension*, the ability to evaluate the material of the texts. This skill is commonly applied in critical reading activities. (4) *Creative comprehension*. As the highest level of reading comprehension. In the process of this creative comprehension, the readers develop their own though to create and improve new ideas, to make new approach and point of view. To achieve this reading level, students may use variety of strategies which are related to understanding factors by reading text and its contexts. Besides, students should emphasize the process of coding mechanically in order to get understanding on other written language to improve knowledge.

Furthermore, the definition of reading is the process of pronouncing words and acquiring meanings from any printout stuff involving analysis, and the organization of complex skills including lessons, thoughts, consideration, integration, and problem solving which results the clear information for the readers (Songsiengchai, 2010). He notes several methods or strategies (1) *Planning and Monitoring*, commonly called meta-cognitive nature in method of reading, controls on reader's awareness and comprehension. When a reader merges with this strategy, they would know more on how to get any information and to determine the reading objectives as well as to make a prediction. They would be able to explain any idea by using the proper strategies and knowing what a writer would exactly like to share in a reading text.   (2) *Identifying Important Ideas and Information,* a method trains the readers' skill to sort out any important things in the text, to identify any implicit and explicit main ideas, to conclude the text, and to relate the ideas and information. This strategy is also applicable for the readers to differentiate either any important information, or any interesting but less important information to understand in the text. The implementation of this strategy helps students as the readers to distinguish which information is important or less important in fiction or non-fiction books and references. (3) *Making a Question,* a method that is used to examine readers' understanding about a text. This is also to know the reader's objectives in reading the text. This one would help the readers have deeper understanding on the text. (4) *Making a Connection/Relation,* helps the students or readers in establishing a link between each paragraph. The readers are able to relate their educational background to the text they read. The connection may be between the texts, the text with the readers, or the text with the reality.

The objectives of using this strategy is to help students understand better when they keep thinking or applying their knowledge, personal experience, or anything around them related to the topics of the text. (5) *Synthesizing,* a method which is applicable to train the readers' skills in summarizing some ideas from different sources, taking a conclusion and comparison, and generalizing a text.

Some other reading methods stated by Maulidah (2013) are: (a) Spelling Method as the starting point of learning to read begins with the introduction to alphabetic letters. Then the students are guided to introduce themselves to syllables by combining some letters. The next process will be about the formation of words and sentences. (b) Voice Method as the basic principle of the learning process is not really different with the spelling or alphabet method. (c) Syllables Method starts with the introductions of syllables, such as: ba, bi, bu, be, bo, and so forth. Then those syllables are combined to be meaningful words. (d) Words Method is a method using words as the base of introduction to syllables and letters. (e) Global Method is one method in language teaching to teach reading and writing in the beginning by providing language units completely and comprehensively so that the students will recognize and copy them over.

There are several types of Reading highlighted. The *Intensive Reading*, enables the reader gained knowledge or analysis from the text. This reading's objective is to read shorter text and the reading is being done to obtain specific data. This type of intense reading is done by students who are trying to learn new information. Intensive reading will give students a background for analyzing structural problems and expanding their vocabulary and idiom knowledge. Intensive reading also focuses on grammatical forms, discourse markers, and the text's structure in order to better understand the literal meaning, ambiguity of interactions, and retention over a long period of time. *Extensive Reading* is a language teaching strategy where students are expected to read a sizable amount of text for global comprehension.

In extensive reading, the reader is interested in learning something else but the reader is not interested in specific or crucial information and the reader typically read to stay informed. *Aloud Reading*, involves speaking correctly and loudly. Aloud reading is an important factor in English language teaching, because speaking or expressing thoughts allows the students to develop the skill of reading very well, and it also allows the students to develop the skill of pronouncing very well. *Silent Reading* is an activity to teach students how to read silently so they can focus their attention or use their intellect to understand the texts. To increase fluency, silent reading seems to be a useful strategy. But in order to increase fluency, more practice, more encouragement, and more guided oral reading are needed than either of these approaches can provide.

There are also several reading techniques, according to Freeman (2011) such as: (1*) Skimming* is high-speed reading that can help us save time and get through a lot of content rapidly. The skimming strategy is one of the reading techniques and is applied when a reader wants to understand the main concepts of a passage. The reader only reads the information that is necessary for the purpose and does not read everything. Skimming involves reading a text to understand its gist—its core idea or overall meaning. (2) *Scanning* is initially looking at the title, table of contents, and other parts of the text, readers can find specific information without reading the complete text by using the scanning method. Scanning contains a lot of information. When we scan, we read only the keywords that will help us answer our question; we do not read the entire text. Furthermore, scanning is the quickly searching for a specific piece of information inside a text or phrase. (3) *Predicting* is the ability to anticipate or forecast future events using linguistic, lexical, and cultural cues. This strategy has the advantage of preparing our mind to take in, understand, verify, and check information. (4) *Previewing* involves the reader trying to learn as much as possible about the text before reading it. Previewing is also a rapid reading technique for learning a little bit about a text. (5) *Making Inference,* when readers are able to integrate what they learn from what they read and blend it with their own experiences, they are able to draw inferences. As a result, people interpret the text differently or come to conclusions that are not directly expressed in it. Good readers continually draw conclusions from what they read. (6) *Summarization*, involves resetting the context of the original text using one's own words. Summarizing is the process of retelling the key points of a passage in a much shorter form.

The development of effective reading skill is achievable when a reader reaches the competence levels in reading skill. Romadhoni (2010) in his final bachelor paper categorized competence levels of reading skills to be: literal, inferential, and critical levels. (1) *Literal understanding level* includes what the writers write literally. In this case, the reader needs to understand explicit ideas and information of the reading text. Some of the information are in form of introducing or remembering a fact, identifying main and supporting ideas, categorizing, and concluding. Besides, the readers are able to catch the information by following any contextual clues to give the text meaning. Another thing is following the specific clues, sequences, identification of conclusion, connection among explicit statements, and any structure involving causality, comparison, and contradiction. The following questions may provide you a reference to decide a reader's literal level in reading skill: What is the main idea of the text?; How does the writer make a conclusion in the text?; What is the general description of the first paragraph in the text?;

What happened firstly, secondly, and lastly in the text, and what are the difference among those parts? (2) *Inferential level* is about the understanding of what the writer intent to share through what the writer mentions. It means that the readers have to read every line and concluding based on the statements with indirect meanings. The readers may do it by paying attention to main ideas, supportive ideas, and their causality.

This skill also covered the interpreting of figurative language, concluding, predicting final result, determining types, and predicting the writer's ideas. The typical questions of this level vary as: What is the writer's intention? What is the topic of the text? What is the impact of the text? and How is the end of the text/story? (3) *Critical level* includes the understanding of what the writers should express. This level is a quite high level in reading skill which requires the readers using external criteria from their experience or knowledge background to test the quality, value of a text, writer's excuses, simplification, and generalization (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). The readers respond the text emotionally and intellectually because their experiences vary. The typical question will be: What will possibly happen next in the text?; Is the writer argumentation logical?; Is there any alternative argument?; Is it a fact or the writer's opinion?; Do you agree with the writer's argumentation?; What is the best solution of the case in the text? Furthermore, reading can be classified into two broad phases according to Anderson (2000), that is, *beginning phase of reading and advance phase of reading skill.*

Beginning phase in this case is defined as emphasizing the coding process of reading mechanically. The beginning phase of reading set the recoding and decoding. Through the recoding process, the readers associate pictures of sounds and their combinations. This process involved knowledge of the world in a scheme categorizing an amount of knowledge and experience in mind. This phase includes three (3) components: visual, phonological, and semantic memories. In visual memory level, letters, words, and sentences are viewed as graphic symbols. In phonological memory, there happens voicing the symbols which are also in form of words and sentences. In semantic memory, a process of understanding the words and sentences occurs. Then, it was stated that to achieve the beginning phase of reading skill, a reader has to be able to voice the written symbols, master the vocabulary, and include the meanings of the language acquisition. The purpose of experiencing the beginning phase of reading skill is to achieve students' ability in reading simple words and sentences fluently and appropriately.

The objective of advance phase in reading skill is to understand other people's written language and add the readers' knowledge as well as to develop readers'

emotions. In the advance phase, there are technical reading method, silent reading including fast reading, understanding reading, and so on. The advance phase of reading is based on the cognitive complexity, classified into literal reading and high-level reading. The high-level understanding covers interpretative, critical, and creative understandings. Critical and creative understandings are classified into evaluative understanding.

The classification of reading levels is also categorized into such levels: (1) *Literal Comprehension*, is the ability to catch explicit information in the text. It includes all details in the text, pronoun reference, and sequence of events. (2) *Interpretative/Inferential Comprehension*, stands as reorganization and inferential understanding. It is a comprehension on the implicit meanings or conclusion of the reading text. Interpretative comprehension covers concluding the main ideas of the texts, causality stated in indirect way, pronoun reference, adverb and cloze reference. (3) *Critical Comprehension*, is an ability to evaluate the text material. Evaluative comprehension exists in critical reading activity. Critical comprehension depends on literal, interpretative, and significant ideas comprehensions. (4) *Creative Comprehension,* is the highest level in reading skill. In the process of creative comprehension, readers develop their thoughts to create new ideas, improve their new ideas and the approaches, and create their own mindsets.

According to Harmer (2017) the principle of reading should consist of (1) teachers encourage students to read as often and as much as possible, (2) students need to be engaged with what they are reading, (3) teachers encourage students to respond to the content of a text and explore their feelings about it, not just concentrate on its construction,(4) prediction is a major factor in reading, (5) teacher has to match the task to the topic when using intensive reading text, and (6) good teacher exploit reading texts to the full. He also notes three stages which can be applied by the teacher to achieve the learning objectives and to make students effective and skill reader. There are three stages of teaching reading: *pre-reading, whilst-reading and post-reading.*

This reading stage is intended to arouse the student's interest. The students can answer the all of teachers' question. Pre-reading based on the students experience or knowledge. Pre-reading can be done by some activities, those are: the first is using picture, it means that a teacher will give a picture to get response of the students about topic of reading. In this case, the students will try to tell about the essence about the picture that the teacher gives and the students will answer some questions that have relation with the picture. And the second is completing the title, its means after the students determining the picture,

the teacher will ask the students what is the possible title for the picture and the students will answer it.

During activity, the teacher gives the task before the students read the task. It's called "surfaced problem". It can be done with several activities, there are: asking simple factual question, not yes-no question, completing a table, and making a list. In this step, the students read the text quickly and do the task individually, while the teacher checks them. After finishing the surface problem activities, the teacher provides the tasks which are given after the students read the text. it's called "deep problem" it can be done by: giving more difficult WH-question, giving true or false statement with reason, and giving problem with new words by deducting the meaning from the context.

Post reading is a final activity that the students have to communicate in English. It also meant to develop the students understanding. This activity can be done by retelling the content of reading text. For this step, the teacher is going to know the student preparation in mastering reading text. the students retell the content in their own words. Summarizing the content. It can be done by using the key word to summarize the content of text and give other suitable communicative activity in the form of jumble sentence. The students then will give a response to the problem found in the text. during this activity, the students do task given by the teacher, while teacher monitors and check the whole groups. The teacher should to be certain that the class clearly knows about the objectives reading class. The objectives or aim must be placed where it can be seen by all of the students all times. It can be putposter or chart.

At English Department Universitas Jambi, Reading Course or Subject is taught structurally for the first three semesters of academic year namely Reading for General Purposes, Reading for Academic Purposes, and Reading for Professional Contexts, as compulsory and prerequisite subjects at English Department Universitas Jambi. Each reading course has its own specific learning objectives, competences and outcomes to accommodate and facilitate learner's needs in mastering reading comprehension (Andriyani et al., 2019). Since this course is one of prerequisite courses or academic requirements and rules in English Department, the learners must complete a reading course (basic reading) offered at the first semester otherwise they are not allowed to continue or apply reading courses or subjects (advance reading) taught at the second and third semester.

However, the implementation of teaching and learning of Reading Course at English Department Universitas Jambi still remains problems for some aspects such as the learners' different background of reading knowledge, skill and competences. In the classroom practice, the learners

were just put in a heterogeneous class in which many of them have different ability and cognitive competence in reading skill and experiences. This brings into some potential issues on teaching-learning process such as selecting and choosing suitable course materials, deciding teaching and learning strategy and conducting an assessment process. Those problems bring more effects on ineffective and insufficient teaching and learning process.

To respond this problem, it is needed a continuum evaluation through an academic research or study to identifying or mapping learners' level in reading comprehension to assist lecturers to create an appropriate teaching instructional model or approach that fit to the level of learners' reading competence. For more specific, this study explores the three levels of reading comprehension skill of learners, called literal, inferential and critical comprehension. A set of literary reading test was used to measure learners' level of reading competence and the result of test was used as an indicator of the learners' reading level of competences. Other specific thing outlined in this study is that the finding might be useful to help learners to improve their competence in reading skill and brings benefit to the lecturers to create a dynamic learning environment in teaching reading comprehension in English Department Universitas Jambi.

METHOD

This study used a quantitative method which aims to portray the existing phenomenon, use numbers to describe individual or group and measure characteristic of a condition (Creswell, 2013, 2016; Latif, 2014). In this study, the researcher identifies learners' reading comprehension levels which aim to figure out their individual competence in Reading Comprehension. This brings benefit to several aspect such as improving lecturers' competences in selecting material of learning which is suitable with students' level of reading comprehension and improving EFL learners' technique of reading.

The participants of this study were 78 EFL learners at English Department Universitas Jambi consisting of 50 female and 28 male learners. They were registered in the academic year of 2020-2021 and sit in Reading Classes at three separated groups, (R001, R002, R003). These EFL learners initially just completed three level of reading courses (Reading for General Purposes, Reading for Academic Purposes, Reading for Professional Contexts) as compulsory and prerequisite subjects at English Department Universitas Jambi.

The source of data in this study was obtained from the result of a literary reading test in a form of multiple choice and essay models. Reading test was applied to measure students' achievement or competence in completing certain tasks or mastering reading skill. In this study, a set of reading test adapted from several literary readings has been administered to participants.

The test consists of thirty-three items, reflected to measure three levels of reading competences: literal, Inferential/Interpretative, and critical comprehension. The test result has been calculating and scoring each item statistically based on the indicator of the scoring system and criteria. It classified into each level of competence which is described in the form of percentage and presented through diagram and chart.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Test Result of Literal Level

The test in this level is constructed in form of multiple choices to know a basic level of reading competence. Based on the result, there were 77 or (99%) participants can complete most of the test items. But there was only 1 or (1%) participant who can complete partly the test. From this result, it can be inferred that most of participants were just achieve literal level of competence. For the detail, they just achieved a basic understanding of the readings such as finding explicit meaning or information of the text, series or chronological events and understanding a basic question of the text.

The Test Result of Inferential Level

Based on the calculated test result, it was found that there were 24 or (31%) participants were able to answer all test items successfully. There were around 54 (69%) participants could not complete the test. So, it can be concluded that numerous participants were still unable to respond the test items and they fail to gain inferential level. For the detail, these participants fail to understand about the meaning of words between sentences or implicit meaning or information of text, draw a conclusion from the text, and understand the implicit causal effect.

The Test Result of Critical Level

This test is formed in essay consisted of several items that know learners' point of view or perspectives, critics and comment toward the text. There were 19 or (24%) participants can give their answer critically. It is indicated that they have critical understanding or evaluative to show their ability to evaluate the information of the text. In addition, they can evaluate the text by using their own prior knowledge. In answering descriptive questions, they tended to express or describe simply the ideas by considering some supporting facts to strengthen their thought. So that, to reach this critical level effectively, they

have to improve their level of inferential optimally since both of these levels work in line.

Kelas	LITERAL LEVEL				INFERENTIAL LEVEL				CRITICAL LEVEL			
	>50%		<50%		>50%		<50%		>50%		<50%	
R001	25	32%	1	1%	4	5%	22	28%	10	13%	16	21%
R002	19	24%	0	0%	7	9%	12	15%	1	1%	18	23%
R003	33	42%	0	0%	13	17%	20	26%	8	10%	25	32%
TOTAL	(77) **99%**		1%		(24) **31%**		69%		(19) **24%**		76%	

Figure 1. The Table of Recapitulated Scoring

This table noted the different ratio of each level of competence. It is interpreted that most participants were still in the position of literal level. Some of them have obtained the inferential level and few of them have achieved critical level. In addition to the result above, there is a relationship between each level of competence that can be illustrated in the following pie chart:
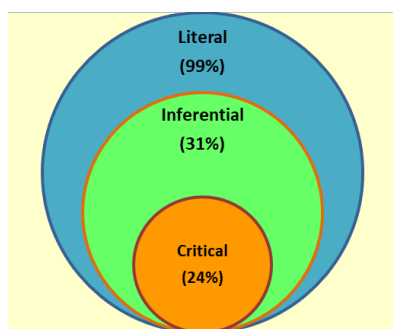

Figure 2. The Level of Competence

This chart particularly indicated that 99% of participants have completed the literal test and they were categorized into literal level. Among 99% of them, there were 24 participants (31%) have successfully completed both literal and inferential test and they can reach the inferential level. Among all participants who achieved both literal and inferential, there was also found about 19 participants (24%) have successfully done all test items and they were categorized into critical level.

CONCLUSION

From the finding of the research, it can be inferred that majority of learners, around 99%, have just achieved the literal level of reading comprehension which is regarded as a basic level of competence in reading skill. This is in line with Romadhoni (2010) points of view that reading skill has actually been categorized into several levels of comprehension and *Literal comprehension*, is seen as a very low or basic level of comprehension. Readers in this level can get information from the text explicitly that includes detail of the text, pronoun and the sequence of story in the text.

A part from this achievement, there were 69% among the literal achiever have gained the position of inferential level of competence. Practically the learners in this level have got an understanding of finding the implicit meaning of the text or between sentences. They also can conclude the information of text, which involves main ideas and implicit causal effect relationship. Besides, they were able to obtain the information explicitly in a text and find the chronological event of the text.

More interestingly there were 24% among all learners have been successful to reach the level of critical competence in which they were able to give comment about the information in the text, develop their own idea to build new concept that fit to their own perspective. But unfortunately, there were still few learners, around 1%, who failed to reach both inferential and inferential. In practical, they only gained a very basic skill in reading such as understanding a little bit about text and they cannot answer successfully the questions which were reflected to the level of Literal, inferential and Critical competence. So, this finding brings the implication that in teaching reading, learners should be provided with kind of readings and its practice that can foster and accelerate their comprehension in order to reach the higher level of competence in reading skill. It is also suggested to the lecturers to provide a learning material based on EFL learners' competence in Reading Skill.

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