Interrogating the text: questioning to mediate junior secondary school students’ barriers to reading comprehension

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is the capacity to analyze and comprehend the text's meaning. Reading through questioning techniques can improve the skill of thinking, but it can also be a problem for some individuals. This study aims to unveil EFL students’ barriers in reading comprehension through questioning technique. Eight students and one English teacher at a private junior secondary school in Medan, South Sumatera, Indonesia participated in this study. Nested in qualitative descriptive method, classroom observation and semi-structured interview were used to gather data. Study findings expose that the researchers found the students’ problems in reading comprehension through questioning techniques, such as problems in concentration, problems in understanding vocabulary, comprehending long sentences, arranging words in English, applying grammatical rules, and understanding how to pronounce the words (error pronunciation). In response to the students’ barriers, this study recommends to solve these problems through organizing an ice-breaking, giving some questions to students, and providing opportunities for students to ask questions.

Introduction

Reading is commonly associated with the quiet, internal, and personal interaction between readers and texts. Thus, it indicates that many things can happen when reading—studying how people interpret literary material to gain knowledge or comprehend messages. Reading is not a passive activity. It is a complex system, so the reader constructs meaning from the reading material. Then they apply their experience and knowledge to the message and the author's target (Damanik et al., 2021).

According to Nurjanah (2018), reading comprehension is one of learners’ most critical English skills. Students must get some inferred and expressed information from the text by
reading or interpreting the phrases to acquire the answers to the questions in this skill truly. When reading comprehension tests, students face various problems depending on their mastery ability. Reading comprehension skills can be easy for students who have a large vocabulary. Those students who well in their vocabulary will improve as well as they can. Each student may have different challenges, requiring unique educational methods and learning activities.

Students face various challenges when taking reading comprehension tests, depending on their ability to master (Evenddy et al., 2021). Reading comprehension will be simple for students with an extensive vocabulary. Those students who speak well will improve as much as they can. Each student may have different challenges, requiring unique educational methods and learning activities. Reading is a dynamic behavior that requires repeating written material and visual feedback, and reading is described as a challenging activity, with the ability to read as a distinct skill. In terms of information acquisition, reading and speaking have certain similarities. In this context, reading also needs the application of norms such as the maxim of cooperation, which needs prior knowledge of the topic (Sari et al., 2020).

Reading is how the reader receives, analyzes, and understands information to determine the text message. As a result, the focus of this activity is not only on reading skills but also on comprehending the text (Daulay et al., 2020). It is the process by which we obtain information from what we see, such as text and symbols. Reading is also important and necessary for students because their academic achievement depends on a significant portion of their reading skills. Reading requires readers to manage every part of the text to comprehend it because reading is a constant process of guessing, and what one brings to the text is often more important than what one finds in it (Mahyuddin, 2019).

Duke et al. (2021) argued that reading comprehension means the ability to read most or all of the words in a text required. Word reading is fundamental for reading comprehension, but more prerequisite is needed. Word processing and comprehension-bridging competencies are also necessary for reading comprehension. What we read and why we read it greatly influences our reading comprehension. Some studies on practical techniques to enhance reading comprehension will be explored later in this study, which has placed instruction in settings where students are asked to use their textual knowledge in some way.

Reading comprehension is the discussion among readers and the information they include in the text, such as existing knowledge or context and the techniques they apply. Variables connected to the text, such as readers’ interest in the text and their comprehension of the text genre, are also included in this procedure. Therefore, it means the reader’s experience with the text and how they react to and comprehend it. Individual competencies such as experience and the ability to read the text also influence them, which play a role in creating meaning (Klingner et al., 2007).

Teaching is a system of transferring knowledge. Reading involves receptive skills. Teaching about reading means not only going to study to read but also doing more of it. One of the reading goals is to comprehend the text. Teaching reading facilitates students’ performance in understanding texts and provides learners with benefits for practice, such as efficient instruction, group projects, and reading recovery. In teaching reading comprehension, the teacher provides a reading text with a new topic, starts to execute the process of extracting general knowledge or previous knowledge of students related to the
subject by answering questions or communicating their opinions on those topics, and then students have an opinion about what will be mentioned in progress. (Muchtar, 2019). When teaching reading comprehension, teachers can implement a variety of techniques. Regarding teaching and learning, strategy is defined as the general structure of teachers’ and students’ activities in carrying out teaching and learning activities to achieve the goals described. Teaching reading is not a simple job, but it is valuable, and it can be very beneficial when we see our students’ achievements and know that we have contributed (Saputri et al., 2021).

A teacher can change learning techniques even though they are in the corridor with the same method. One method can be applied through various learning techniques. While teaching a subject in the classroom, teachers constantly participate in students’ instructional and learning interactions. Technique refers to the actual application that occurs in a classroom. A technique is a specific trick, procedure, or instrument used to achieve an instant goal. It should be constant with a strategy and thus in sync with planning. Technique refers to how a teacher conducts himself or herself during teaching and learning. The method used determines the learning techniques and the method is determined by the approach used.

Teachers can use the question-and-answer session to apply various questioning techniques and acquire them to encourage and promote learners’ critical thinking in teaching. The most efficient way to engage students participating in the teaching is through questioning. Teachers’ questioning is necessary during reading instruction because it allows the teacher to fully facilitate little children’s groups with the same reading level. Children communicate and improve their reading ability. The questioning techniques are required to organize a facilitated discussion to develop children’s abilities. The efficient methods of instruction can be described by the prompt rephrasing of open, inferential questions into closed and literal questions. As a result, questioning during reading instruction may need to be reconsidered for teachers to “guide” students’ mastery of reading throughout all grades (Phillips, 2013). One of the most straightforward strategies teachers use to get their learners to reflect, understand, and participate in the classroom is questioning. Its practical application motivates and keeps students on track, engaging them in real and meaningful ways. In low schools, this form of questioning dialogue is frequently used to assist students in thinking through implementing formal norms in particular situations. For decades, the benefit of asking questions to teach and explain ideas has been recognized (Hill, 2016).

Teachers are always engaged with their students in the teaching and learning process. One of the techniques that is acceptable for learners to achieve reading is the questioning technique. Teachers can use the question-and-answer discussion to apply various questioning techniques and reinforce them to energize students and enhance learning in the classroom. Questioning is one of the most efficient ways to educate students in lesson delivery. The questioning technique is crucial because it can stimulate learning, develop students’ thinking prospects, get clear ideas, stir creativity, and provide motivation to act. It is also one of the teachers’ ways of effectively assisting students in developing their knowledge (Shanmugavelu et al., 2020).

However, the researchers use text as the media in this research. Generally, a text is an article arranged in some sentences we usually read. When we read, listen to, or watch a text, we interpret its meaning. It means writers create and construct a text when they write with language. When a reader reads a text, he or she is interpreting it. When communicating with
other people, they interpret and create text (Helmi, 2012). The two main aspects of the text are; literary and factual. Each kind of this text has a common way of using language.

Literary texts are spoken texts that investigate and describe human experience, especially to elicit a contemplative, imaginative, or emotional reaction in the reader or listener. The study of literary texts is an essential aspect of the English curriculum. A student's interaction with a literary text can be a transformative and emotive experience influencing their ideas and thoughts. While literary texts are typically associated with books, they can also be distributed through other media, such as magazines, films, radio, television, computers, and various media combinations. There are many different types of literary writing, and many of them overlap, such as narrative, drama, and reaction. Literary writing can make us laugh, cry, reflect on our lives, or question our views.

The factual text refers to something focused on or incorporates facts rather than theories or personal judgments. Factual texts are those that communicate information, ideas, or issues in such a way that the reader or listener is informed, instructed, or enlightened. Explanation, exposition, and information are examples of factual text. Recount, method, and discussion are all included in the report. Factually correct texts can be spoken or written. Most of the meaning in spoken texts is derived from facial experience, gesture, or technological use. Meaning is also contained in visual features such as graphs, maps, diagrams, and labels in textual texts.

Whether written or spoken, the factual text expresses its facts from a specific point of view. However, the writer's or speaker's perspective or point of view may not be stated explicitly. Although factual texts claim to be focused, objective information, they are more than just objective representations of reality. Instead, they are reality designs created by a writer or speaker. Some kinds of text include factual text such as; explanation text, procedure text, exposition text, report text, recount text, descriptive text, and discussion text (Isnaini, 2015).

The researchers used descriptive text to know the students' reading comprehension problems in this research. Descriptive text is a genre of writing in which the writer or speaker describes a specific thing, person, animal, place, or event to the readers or listeners. This text uses the simple present tense. The procedure of describing is accomplished by ordering their features clearly, the early stages with naming them, categorizing them, and dealing with their attributes, habits, capabilities, and so on, so that the readers or listeners can potentially acknowledge what the writer is writing about as if they could directly see with their own eyes.

Based on the preliminary research of the eighth-grade students at a private junior secondary school in Medan, the researchers found that the student's reading skills are lacking. There are many problems the students face in reading. It can be seen from the fact that students find the problem comprehending the text or reading a book due to their low reading comprehension skills. It is challenging to find the text main idea and make conclusions about it. These problems occur because the students' vocabulary levels are low, and reading a text in a different language differs from reading in a first language daily. Thus, the researchers chose the title because there are still many problems that did not answer yet, such as the students' problem in reading comprehension. It is related to Pandiangan's research (2021) found that the problem of students in determining the main idea and understanding the meaning of words or vocabulary.
They had problems working on problems. The result is that only a few students understand the comprehension after they read about it. The cause of student problems is the lack of understanding of the meaning of the test, so they have problems determining the information contained in a test. Furthermore, the researchers decided to conduct the study based on the title to know what problems and factors students get in reading comprehension through the questioning technique.

Method

This research was carried out at a private junior secondary school in Medan, South Sumatera, Indonesia. The researchers used qualitative research to conduct this study. Qualitative research focuses on better understanding individual or social events by developing detailed and complicated explanations that can be communicated verbally, documenting in-depth perspectives from informants, and conducting studies in natural contexts. This method aims to understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects. The methods usually used are interviews, observations, and documents (Sidiq & Choiri, 2019).

The researchers in this study used instrument data to obtain results through observation, interview, and documentation. All good research studies start with observation. According to Syaukani (2018), researchers can observe student attitudes toward learning. The term observation refers to the act of observing the object under study. It means that the researchers can determine student behavior while they are learning. In this study, the researchers observe the classroom learning process activities regarding reading comprehension. Then, the interaction refers to the teaching reading activities.

The interview is one way of collecting data through structured, semi-structured, and unstructured oral communication activities. In the interview, the researchers used semi-structured to take the interview. A semi-structured interview asks several questions, and it is possible to ask new questions based on the context (Suyitno, 2018). Thus, this term, the researchers interviewed students and a teacher to ask questions about the questioning technique. Documentation is another method to collect the data. Documentation is a tool for gathering information from a written source or documenter, such as books, magazines, or diary notes. The researchers employ the documentation technique to obtain detailed information about the condition of teachers and the number of students (Herdiansyah, 2010).

The first technique for analyzing data was data reduction. The method for choosing, focusing, reducing, extracting, and managing data from varied sources, from written-up field notes or interview transcripts, is called data reduction. In this study, the researchers selected data obtained during research on student problems with reading comprehension using a questioning technique, and then the data were classified and chosen. The second technique was data display. This step was completed by presenting an organized set of information and the chance to conclude because the information collected during the qualitative research process is typically in the form of a narrative; hence it needs. It requires simplicity without affecting content.

The third technique of analyzing data was conclusion drawing. The drawing conclusion process begins after the data were collected by drawing a preliminary conclusion. In other words, the conclusion is continuously analyzed, and the validity is verified to obtain the
perfect conclusion about an analysis of students' problem in reading comprehension through questioning technique at the eighth grade of a private junior high school in Medan.

Findings and discussion

Problems with concentration

If someone has a problem concentrating, he/she will be confused to explain the meaning. In the observation and interview, the researchers saw the teacher asks the students to summarize the text they read and explain it to the other students. However, the students needed clarification because some only mentioned a few points in the text. When English class started, they were often sleepy and did not understand what the teacher taught. If the teacher gives them several English questions, the students tend to be silent and ignore them. The researchers saw that the students were not focused while reading the text and answering the teacher's questions.

Based on the result above, the researchers showed that the student got several problems in reading comprehension through the questioning technique. The first problem is that the students have difficulties concentrating during teaching reading. The causing factor was that student interest in English was still low. Thus, it influenced their way of study process in reading comprehension. One of the students expressed that he did not like English. It is a difficult lesson. When English class started, he was often sleepy and did not understand what the teacher taught. If the teacher asked him an English question, he tended to be silent and ignorant.

Data showed that students cannot accept the material yet, can be seen from the teacher's interview:

Then they could not receive the material because they lacked focus, so I explained the introduction about the identification when I wanted to ask questions like yesterday Descriptive Text material.

Based on the statement above, the teacher confessed that it happened because they were engaging in English still low. However, the teacher still tried to motivate the students, make ice-breaking, give questions to students, and provide opportunities for students to ask questions. From that, the teacher will know which part of the material the students did not accept. Thus, that is true that concentration could affect students' ability to understand learning material.

Problems with understanding vocabulary

This problem was found in students' interviews which they say learning English is usual, they do not like reading, especially in English text. Get to feel nervous and did not fully comprehend the meaning of the texts. He said that the questioning technique is good, but sometimes he did not understand what the teacher meant, especially when the teacher spoke English to ask, which made him more confused. He could answer teachers' questions related to the text. Eventually, the teacher often corrected their answer.

The second problem is a problem understanding vocabulary, which means that students struggle to understand the meaning of the words from the teacher or a text. Sometimes the student asked a friend to know what the teacher said. Moreover, some of them opened the
dictionary to find the meaning. The cause of the problem is the students do not understand what a teacher says because they only know a little about vocabulary. It was challenging if the student needed to memorize more vocabulary. The causative factor is that the students are too lazy to memorize words in English. Thus, this problem influences the learning process in English.

*Difficulties in reading long sentences*

This problem was found during the observation. The researchers saw that the students had difficulty reading long sentences they had prepared before answering the question. The researchers’ observation follows, “The students were asked to read and explain the text individually. The students correctly answered the question, and the teacher asked why. While answering the question, the students prepared the answer on paper and then read it. However, the students found it difficult to read because he made it a long sentence. When the teacher inquired about the students’ answer source, they looked confused”.

The third problem is that the students had difficulty understanding long sentences because they thought the words were unfamiliar. The causing factor in this problem is that the students still needed to prepare themselves to answer questions. This situation could be seen when the students answered the teacher’s questions. Most students answered for a long time and seemed to spell the word. However, they still mentioned their answers even though they thought they were wrong. Understanding long sentences is a common problem for most students. As a result of this issue, students who cannot understand long sentences fail to understand the main idea in the text. This situation could be seen when the students answered the teacher’s question. Most students answered for a long time and seemed to spell the word. However, they still mentioned their answers even though they thought they were wrong.

*Problems with arranging words in English and applying grammatical rules*

This problem can be found in students’ interviews. The students said that learning English was difficult when arranging the words. Also, the students did not understand the meaning of the words when answering the teachers’ questions. They only mentioned each word without using the grammar. He also felt complicated arranged sentences in English when answering the questions.

The fourth problem was that students could not arrange words in English, which meant that the students did not understand grammar or had grammar problems. The students got difficulty when he/she wanted to answer the question from the teacher. Because the sentence structure in English differed from Indonesian, the students found it challenging to answer the teacher’s question and interpret the text. When reading, students could interpret sentences word for word; each phrase should be related to understanding the meaning. This situation could be seen when the students tried to answer the teacher’s question directly. They doubted answering because they did not know the structure of grammar. It happened because the student did not understand the grammar yet.

The students also failed to explain the text when differing from what they were required, which meant that they had difficulty reading the text. The difficulty is evident in their failure
to translate and describe the text adequately. The student had a grammar problem. Because
the sentence structure in English differed from Indonesian, the students found it challenging
to answer the teacher's question and interpret the text. When reading, students could not
interpret sentences word for word; each phrase should be related to understanding the
meaning.

Problems with mispronunciation

The researchers found that the students pronounced the words like written words. It can
make the listener misunderstand the meaning. When the students answered the questions,
the teacher repeated what they said because the words pronounced were wrong. The
participants said they liked reading text in English, but it was difficult to pronounce. Often,
they felt doubt because it did not fluent in reading. They also did not understand that reading
a text was caused by the written words and the pronunciation was different.

The last problem the students got was error pronunciation, which meant that the
students could not mention the words well. The causing factor of this problem was that the
students still used the way of Indonesian word pronunciation. When the students answered
the teacher's question, some still read the words like the written letter. They said that what
had been written did not match what was read. It made them confused to read.

Pronunciation is crucial in vocabulary development because it involves distinguishing
between sounds that combine to form words. If a student usually incorrectly pronounces a
word, there is a tendency that he or she will be unable to provide clear information to other
people. Most of them mentioned the words in English same as when they mentioned the
word in Indonesian. The teacher said that the student did not speak the word in English
correctly. Their abilities are still standard, but they are still willing to learn. They have made
progress if they are taught continuously. In this case, pronunciation skills can make the
students more confident when saying something. The support data quote above came from
the teacher interviewed:

The cause that I often see is spelling (pronunciation). When speaking and answering questions, they are
rather unable to say the actual words.

From the interview vignette, the teacher said that the students did not speak the word in
English correctly. Their abilities were still standard, but they were still willing to learn. They
have made progress if they were taught continuously. In this case, pronunciation skills could
make the students more confident when saying something. Moreover, it gave the listeners
an excellent impression, so they did not receive the wrong information. However, if the
students still had problems pronouncing, of course, this caused students to be hesitant to
pronounce words in English.

Conclusion

Based on the data analyzed, the researchers found some problems with students in reading
comprehension through questioning techniques. In this study, there were five findings:
problems in concentration, problems understanding vocabulary, difficulty in reading long
sentences, the students cannot arrange words in English (not understanding grammar), and
not understanding how to pronounce the word (error pronunciation). In addition, the
Students should overcome the problem to make this technique easy to apply, and the teachers also contributed to motivating students in the teaching reading process. The researchers decided these findings as student problems in reading comprehension through questioning techniques.

The factors caused the students' problems involved that student interests in English are still low, students are lazy to memorize words in English, students have not prepared themselves to answer the questions, the students have grammar problems, and the students still use the way of Indonesian word pronunciation. Many students thought the English language was challenging in pronunciation because it was different from Indonesia, and these constraints can cause student learning in reading outcomes to be less than optimal.

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References


