Reading Comprehension and Literary Appreciation: an Analysis of Students Difficulties

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Abstract. This research aims to analyze difficulties encountered by students of the English Education study program at Tadulako University in reading comprehension of literary works. A qualitative approach with a descriptive research design applied in this research. The samples were 98 students chosen randomly. Data were collected from existing documents, that is the results of pretest administered in the Reading for Literary Appreciation class. Results of data analysis showed that the students' reading comprehension of the three genres of literary works – prose, poetry, and drama is low with percentage intervals of comprehension 18-37%. Eight difficulties encountered by the students in reading comprehension of literary works. They were vocabulary mastery, making inferences, recognizing the author's opinion/bias, summarizing and paraphrasing, identifying figurative language, analyzing poetic or sound devices, evaluating author's style, and analyzing the story elements. The findings provide information on students' difficulties in reading comprehension of a variety of literary texts (prose, poetry and drama), which previous research have not yet investigated it. Therefore, teachers can design and apply strategies to help students improve their reading comprehension. Future researchers, furthermore, can find these findings resourceful to support their studies.

Keywords: *Reading Comprehension, Literary Works, Reading for Literary Appreciation*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one the macro skills of language learning. It is regarded as the most frequent activity performed in the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language (Mertosono et al., 2020). Reading can be defined as a process of communication between writer and reader that involves understanding the meaning of the text to get the message the writer wants to convey. Therefore, when the reader can find the purpose and meaning in the form of facts, ideas, and feelings from a piece of writing, it can be said that communication process between the writer and the reader has taken place.

Reading activities should be intended to foster reader's reasoning skills because reading is a process of unifying information obtained by the reader from the text he reads with knowledge and opinions he has. Mertosono et al. (2020) explain three main things in reading activities: knowledge and experience that the reader already knows; connecting the knowledge and experience with the text read; and the process of acquiring meaning actively in accordance with the views had. In other words, a person cannot be said to understand a text if he does not yet have the ability to associate the information found in the text with the knowledge he has.

Reading activities in the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University have various purposes. For example, in the first semester reading activities are intended for general communication matters. In the second semester reading activities are meant for information and leisure. Reading for literary appreciation is found in the third semester followed by reading for academic purposes in the fourth semester. Regardless of the purpose, these reading activities lead to the ultimate goal of the reading itself, that is reading comprehension. It means, reading comprehension is always a priority in learning reading skills.

Reading comprehension aims to obtain the information stated either explicitly or implicitly in the text. There are four levels of reading comprehension. First, literal comprehension is achieved when reader is able to find explicit information from the text. In contrast, inferential comprehension is achieved when he is able to find implicit information combined with his background knowledge to make assumptions. When he can evaluate the text by comparing the information with his background and experience, he gets into critical comprehension. Last, in creative comprehension he uses the cognitive dimension fused with imagination to get new perspective beyond what is presented by the writer.

Reading comprehension is the process of integrating information obtained from a text with existing knowledge of the reader to construct meaning. This process can be said to be very complex because when reading takes place, there is a process of negotiation and interaction between the ideas, thoughts and feelings of the writer with the mind and eyes of the reader. Furthermore, process of comprehension does not only involve a quite good linguistic knowledge but also cognition and intelligence competence of the reader. The process can be very challenging when dealing with literary works, or well-known as literary appreciation.

Literary appreciation is one thing that needs to be considered when referring to literary terms. This is inseparable from the distinctive nature of literature itself which appears in the three literary genres namely prose, poetry and drama. Literally,

appreciation of literary works is an effort to make literary works more valuable. Literary appreciation helps readers to conclude the meaning behind the literary works, their impact on life, values, motivations, and beliefs attached to the literary works. It allows readers to have a better understanding of the emotions or psychological attitudes of writers towards their works.

Appreciation of literary works provides more space for readers to gain deeper insight into literary works. It opens up more details about a literary work than meets the eye. It is defined as the ability to examine, understand and evaluate or make critical assessment of literary works to train intellectual and academic power. Through this evaluation readers can easily interpret the writer's intent, complexity, advantages and disadvantages of literary works. Appreciation of literary works is a process in which one measures the reader's interpretative response to a literary work.

To understand more about literary appreciation the notion and stages of literary appreciation needs to consider, its stages including the elements and their importance to literature as a whole. Writing styles, themes, plot, mood, diction, use of figurative language, literary devices and other elements that appear in a literary work are considered and studied through the use of literary appreciation (Anigbogu & Uwakwe, 2019; Chamber, 2022). In other words, to appreciate the literary works there are several indispensable elements to take account.

Stages in literary appreciation can guide the assessment of literary works. These various stages are considered as part of literary appreciation and determine personal attitudes, reading and observing skills. The stages that the reader goes through are added without removing the previous stages. Thus, appreciating literary works can be considered as a lifelong process. The stages cover pleasure, literacy, escape, self-discovery, exploration beyond oneself, reading variety, and aesthetic goals. Of all the stages, teaching reading for literary appreciation is more emphasized on literacy and reading variety.

Yet, understanding and appreciating literary works has its own challenges for the university students. Results of the final exam of 80 students who enrolled Reading for Literary Appreciation course in the 2022/2023 academic year indicated that their reading comprehension of the literary works were lacking. Of the three literary genres tested (prose, poetry and drama), almost 98 percent of the students were categorized 'failed' with percentage intervals of comprehension ranging from 0% - 39%. In other words, the students' comprehension skill of literary works is very low.

The findings then arise a question of what makes the literary works so difficult to understand and appreciate? Generally, problems in reading comprehension are caused by low vocabulary mastery and minimal basic knowledge of the reading topics (Mertosono et al., 2020). Furthermore, Roodi and Farahmandfar (2020) state that there are various variables including socio-cultural, psycholinguistics and education that influence understanding of literary works. Another thing relates to the use of figurative language which is often found in literary works aimed to make sentence not seem awkward.

In this paper, the authors analyze the difficulties encountered by the students in reading comprehension of different genres of literary works. A more systematic and theoretical analysis is required to completely understand the key tenets of the obstacles encountered by the students. Although studies have been conducted by many authors, problems in reading comprehension of various genres of literary works are still insufficiently explored. Most of the previous studies investigated one genre only. This remains an open question as "What difficulties encountered by the students in reading comprehension of different genres of literary works?"

RESEARCH METHOD

The Design

This study uses one of the qualitative research methods called descriptive qualitative design. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture and analysis words, reports detailed views of information, and conducts the study in natural setting to provide in-depth insights and understanding of real-world problems. It generates data that describe the who, what, and where of events or experiences from a subjective perspective (Mertosono & Erniwati, 2023; Creswell, 2018; Kim et al., 2017). This design is used to comprehensively describe difficulties encountered by the sampled students in reading comprehension of literary works.

The Participants

The samples of this study were 98 students of the English Education study program at Tadulako University. They were selected using a random sample technique with certain considerations according to the research objectives. The 98 students are those who have enrolled Reading for Literary Appreciation course in semester 3. In other words, the participants are at least the sophomores.

The Instrument

Data were collected through existing documents or sometimes called examining records. The data were the results of students' pretest administered in the Reading for Literary Appreciation class. It means, the data analyzed were obtained from the test pertaining reading comprehension of the literary works, which presented in the form of prose, poetry, and drama.

Data Analysis

Five steps were taken to analyze data as adapted from Mertosono & Erniwati (2023). First, the students' answers were identified. The answers were then tabulated in the forms of table to easily compose, quantify and arrange. Next, they were categorized in order to simplify and facilitate the process of data analysis. Last, the data were analyzed using percentage technique as suggested by Sugiyono (2016) as follows:

$P = Fq/N \times 100\%$

Where:
P =Percentage of question response
Fq=Item frequency
N =Number of participants

Finally, before the data were interpreted in order to understand the whole information collected, they were converted into information from which conclusion can be drawn and the significance and implications of the findings can be provided.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the data analysis reveal that students' difficulties in reading comprehension of literary works were very complex. Of some reading skills were tested, accuracy of the answers of the 98 participants ranged 18-37%. It means, the students' reading comprehension of literary works is poor. Eight difficulties found were related to vocabulary mastery, making inferences, recognizing the author's opinion/bias, summarizing and paraphrasing, analyzing figurative language, analyzing poetic or sound devices, evaluating author's style, and analyzing story elements. The following table 1 summarizes the findings.

Table 1. Reading Skills and Mastery Percentage

No	Reading Skills	Percentage
1	Vocabulary mastery	18.37%
2	Making inferences	21.43%
3	Recognizing the author's belief/bias	23.47%
4	Paraphrasing and summarizing	28.57%
5	Analyzing figurative language	27.55%
6	Analyzing sound devices and rhythm	30.61%
7	Evaluating author's style	35.71%
8	Analyzing story elements	36.74%

This study aims to determine students' difficulties in reading comprehension of various genres of literary works. The results of data analysis indicate that there are eight difficulties encountered by the students in reading comprehension of literary works. The first and main problem is vocabulary mastery. Firdiansyah (2022) reported that the main difficulty for students in understanding literary works is lack of vocabulary mastery in English. The use of varied, complex, and highly abstract vocabulary in text makes it difficult for students to read and understand the literary works (Nyembe, 2021; Nelson et al., 2019). This is because vocabulary helps people comprehend language well (Rosdiani et al., 2022). It is indeed key to reading comprehension.

Second difficulty concerns the skill of making inferences. Difficulty in drawing conclusions is caused by the reader's lack of vocabulary, grammar and prior knowledge of various types of text. Students find that making elaborative conclusions is easier than coherent conclusions (Saraswati et al., 2021; Zuhra, 2015). Making inferences is not easy because readers need to use clues in the text which

involve their prior knowledge so that they can interpret something that is not directly mentioned in the reading text. Furthermore, making inferences involve to conclude based on evidence or personal experience.

Recognizing the author's opinion or bias also becomes a challenge for students when reading the literary works. This finding agrees with (Magulod, 2018) that the participants have low level of ability in recognition of the point of view used by the author. To be able to recognize the author's point of view or opinion, readers must look carefully to separate facts from opinions and pay attention to details and specific words in the text (Kantrowitz & Williams, 2011). They should be able to identify words and phrases that show author's feelings about a particular person, group, thing or issue. Recognizing the author's opinion/belief expressed explicitly or implicitly is challenging; it involves shifting modes of thinking and critical analysis (Hollis, 2023; Nelson et al., 2019). In other words, it is not easy as it requires critical thinking.

Next problem relates to summarizing and paraphrasing the text. There are several causes of the difficulty in summarizing and paraphrasing the text including low level of English proficiency that affects their knowledge on grammar and vocabulary, poor reading skills and inability to retain the original author's intended meanings (Regala-Flores & Lopez, 2019; Adi Badiozaman, 2014). Summarizing and paraphrasing is one of the most challenging activities in reading because students are supposed to know how to condense a large amount of information into a shorter form by highlighting important points and ignoring details using different words and expressions while keeping meaning and same tone.

Identifying figurative language like simile, metaphor, hyperbole, paradox, personification, etc., is another challenge for students when reading a literary work because they tend to be literal in their reading and interpretation while processing figurative language requires a variety of linguistic, pragmatic and cognitive skills to obtain the right interpretation. And because it involves cognitive processes to interpret the meaning, students need to know the characteristics of each symbol presented using their imagination (Carrol, 2021; Damayanti, 2018; Nurhaida & Marlina, 2017; Lee & Hughes, 2012). Simply put, identifying figurative language is difficult because it uses words which meaning cannot be interpreted literally.

Although different sound devices contribute to the overall meaning of a literary work, many students find it difficult to identify these poetic devices. A study by Madkour (2016) supports this finding that the students faced problems transferring sound devices as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. In relation to this matter, Chan (2020) argues that unlike paradox and oxymoron, which are semantic devices, alliteration and assonance are sonic devices, and this makes it considerably harder to analyze in terms of their contribution to the themes and meaning of a given text. Furthermore, the author presents the poetic tools to achieve musical or incantatory effects in his work to convey and reinforce meaning through sounds as well as to lead readers to gain a better reading comprehension.

When the students have problems both in vocabulary mastery and literary devices (including figurative language and poetic devices) and details, they automatically encounter difficulty in determining the author's style because evaluating author's style involves understanding how an author communicates his ideas and it depends on both personal traits and purpose (Schwartz et al., 2017). It is the author's lingual-aesthetic impressions in a unique way (Kykot & Opanasenko, 2018). To be able to evaluate the author's style, it is necessary to pay attention to the diction, grammar, tone, literary devices and details used by the author, how the combination of these elements creates the effect as meant by the author.

Being able to analyze elements of a story like characters, plot, setting, conflict and theme is important as these elements create the basic structure of a story. Still, the students get difficulty in determining the elements. This finding concurs with (Abusafi, 2015) that most students were lacking in literary appreciation skills, especially in criticizing the elements of story. Edwards (2022) asserts that story elements are the foundation of comprehension work. It is such a crucial aspect of literacy instruction. If students cannot retell the components of a story, they will not be able to answer higher level questions about the text. The participants of this study found it difficult to determine the elements of the stories; therefore, it makes sense if they get problems in summarizing and paraphrasing the text.

CONCLUSION

Summing up the results of data analysis, it can be concluded that with percentage of interval comprehension 18-37%, the students' reading comprehension of different genres of literary works is categorized 'low'. Of the three genres of literary works analyzed – prose, poetry, and drama, it is found eight difficulties affecting the students' reading comprehension. They include vocabulary mastery or diction, making conclusions or inferences, recognizing opinion/bias of the author, summarizing and paraphrasing of the reading text, identifying figurative language, analyzing poetic devices, evaluating the author's style, and analyzing elements of the story.

One limitation is found in this case. Studies on the analysis of students' difficulties in reading comprehension of various genres of literary works have been scarcely investigated. Consequently, supports to the findings of this research are still lacking. Mertosono & Erniwati (2023) emphasize, when studies on a particular topic are limited, factual information about the topic being examined is insufficient. Because of this potential limitation, this study is here to fill the gap by addressing the need for additional studies to understand more about challenges in reading comprehension of literary works.

This study found that reading comprehension of literary works is very complicated resulted in poor reading comprehension of the students. These findings have implications for the teaching of reading skills at schools. Teachers can find ways to help students have a better reading comprehension based on these findings. Future research can get a clear picture of challenges in reading comprehension of different genres of literary works. The findings also suggest that further research needs to carry out to either add the present information through another descriptive

qualitative research, experiment a particular teaching strategy through an experiment study or solve the problems through a-classroom action research.

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