

Insights about Reading Competences of Students in Public Schools in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia

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Abstract: This article was aimed to investigate the insights about reading competences of students in public schools in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. In particular, it was aimed to explain what and how reading competences of students looked like especially when they were related to their learning achievements at school. The article employed a library-based research design as there was little chance to do a case study to gain in-depth analysis related to the issues being investigated due to time constraint. As this was a library-based research, the main data collection technique was based on evidences derived from extensive literatures related to reading competences of high school students in this province. The analysis was mainly based on the content analytical point of views. The findings suggest that a number of factors strongly affected high school students' reading competences. Despite the case, it was identified that learning and reading cultures of Indonesian students predominantly influenced the ways they approached and made use of reading materials at their hands which eventually led to their reading achievements. The results of the research suggest that as students now live in the era of advanced communication and information technologies, provisions of these technological-based learning devices are inevitable in high schools. Moreover, the local education authorities urgently need to provide adequate reading text books and other interesting reading materials to students. In addition, it is to inform teachers and other educational stakeholders to create learning atmospheres in which students were interested in reading activities from which they could develop their reading cultures for the future.

Key words: reading competence, reading culture, learning culture

I. INTRODUCTION

In general, reading activity is associated with an engagement of a reader with any written text (Enciso, 1996; Feger, 2006; Brozo et al., 2007; Yaul, 2021). When a student works on his assignment, he needs to do some readings or at least read the instruction provided in a written form, or asking the teacher to understand a gist of what to do on that assignment (Erwin, 2004). Likewise, a postman will do some scanning to sort letters according to addresses in order to make him easy for deliveries (LeVine, 2008; Pooley, 2016). A teacher also has to read some guidelines he has written beforehand to make sure that he could perform well in front of his students and therefore his students will take some advantages of his well-prepared presentation (Duffy et al, 1986; Connor et al, 2009). All these activities of reading aim to attain understanding about the written texts being read.

There is another case, however, where people read not solely for understanding but also for pleasure (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). For example, if you read a morning or an afternoon newspaper, you might need to understand the news within the line. At the same time, you need to enjoy the reading while waiting for a cup of coffee before going out for work. This type of reading is mainly aimed at obtaining pleasure instead of understanding the gist of the texts being read.

Another kind of reading as proposed by Wallace (1992: pp.3-4) is having an eye-sight test at an optician's shop where you are asked to read a list of words. In this case, anyone was supposed to 'identify' the words applying physical ability. This has nothing to do with understanding or pleasure instead of solely for physical word identification. Similarly, an Islamic religious cleric asks a congregation to read the Qur'an aloud. In this way of reading, it does not involve 'decoding' because for religious contexts in many ways texts may be learned and recited by rote. Therefore, this kind of reading does not require understanding. Rather, it is just called as a 'recitation'.

Unlike the previous ways of readings, when a little girl in the classroom is shown a flash card containing the word 'here' and she is required to understand the word, she needs to decode it. However, as she fails to respond it rightly, she would not be able to catch the meaning of the word. This kind of reading more likely represents decoding phonemic symbol than reading for understanding. The failure of the little girl to understand the word 'here' is not only due to her misunderstanding about the instruction but also the word being presented separately from its context. In the same way, when the owner of a new computer asks an experienced friend about the instruction in the manual, it is more likely interpreting rather than reading.

For many students, reading is quite often considered as a tedious activity. In some cases, it was found that some students of high schools in Palu consider reading as an activity that merely requires them to answer questions provided in a test or a quiz. Moreover, some students tend to step away from activities which require them to read in any subject provided. Yet, doing the activities of reading in a subject area needs some particular skills. As Good, Simmons, & Smith (1998) explained, these skills are needed by students

in order to be successful across academic disciplines, as well as one that affects personal and economic outcomes for students.

Based on the empirical evidences, this article is aimed to examine several issues related to reading competences of students in high schools. These issues cover texts (scripted materials) provided to students, how students respond to the provided texts, and the implications of the texts for adult literacy and educational agendas in several high schools in Central Sulawesi.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

II.1 *The Nature of Reading*

Harris & Sipay (1980:8) defines reading as the meaningful interpretation of printed or written verbal symbols. Reading is a fluent process where readers combine information from a text and their own background knowledge to build meaning (Nunan, 1985). Smith (2012) elaborates the activity of reading as an interactive process where prior knowledge of readers guides them to better understand the message conveyed directly or indirectly by the text.

Anderson et al. (1985) defines reading as the process of making meaning from written texts. However, it needs the harmony of a lot of related sources of information. Reflecting on the provided definitions of reading, it is important to note that the activity of reading involves the process of decoding information. Yet, the process of receiving information from a text is not linear as it is strongly influenced by prior knowledge of readers. The stronger the prior knowledge of readers on a particular text the better understanding they could make from it. Other factors that influence the process of understanding a text are fluent word recognition and the understanding of a text structure (Anderson, 1985: 6). Here, Anderson (1985) argues that effective rehearses of readers in contrast to outmoded and less useful practices strongly contributed to the understanding of a text. Anderson further (1985: 7) elaborates that text comprehension depends upon a reader's prior knowledge, experience and attitudes and therefore meaning is constructed as a reader links what he reads to what he knows.

Unlike other researchers, Grellet (2004:7) elaborates that reading is a constant process of guessing, and what one brings to the next is often more important than what one finds in it. Here, Grellet (2004) emphasizes the importance of smart guessing when a reader is confronted with a particular text while he or she is not yet familiar with it. Another important point to consider, according to Grellet (2004) is how readers bring meaning into a text in order for them to read effectively.

II.2 *Reading Activities and Factors Affecting Students' Reading Competences*

In the context of teaching reading, according to Harmer (2007: 201 - 202), there are three principles of reading: (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. The view of Harmer (2007) stresses the importance of extensive reading activities for students. However, the quantity of reading activities is not necessarily adequate. Shakil (2020) observed that many Pakistani government schools paid lots of attention on the quantity of reading activities for students but they failed to provide the quality ones. Hedge (2003) expresses that an extensive reading abilities based on learners' motivation and school resources. In this case, the role of teachers and school resources are absolutely needed to ignite reading appetites of students. Sheu (2003) expounds that students with lack reading practices tend to find it difficult to read any text. The arguments of the researchers suggest that it is particularly important for teachers of English to provide a good atmosphere for students to get used with reading activities. The same way, schools need to provide adequate reading resources for students to exercise their reading interests.

Koda (2007) expresses that there are various variables that impact learners' reading comprehension. These cover vocabulary knowledge, prior knowledge, meta cognitive information and reading strategies. Likewise, Nguyen and Trinh (2011) observed that students with good prior knowledge could easily understand the text. Nergis (2013) argues that vocabulary, syntactic consciousness and meta cognitive recognition are the factors that affect reading skills of students. In many cases, having lack of vocabulary in English could affect students' reading competences. In the view of Kamil et al (2008), vocabulary knowledge, including both oral and written vocabulary, is critically important for a child's success in school. The level of understanding of students on vocabulary in a particular text would affect their understanding about the text (Ur, 1996; Rohmaztillah, 2014). To Ur (1996), vocabulary is one of important things to be taught in learning foreign language because it will be impossible for someone to speak up without mastering variety of words in a particular topic. Apart from vocabulary proficiency of students, it is particularly important for students-readers to have a syntactic consciousness over the text. The syntactic awareness, according to Nargis (2013) and Shakil (2020), is something to do with the ability to monitor the relationships among the words in a sentence in order to understand while reading or composing orally or in writing. This awareness is particularly important for readers to get well-connected to the reading texts at hand. Similarly, Shakil (2020) made mention that meta-cognitive recognition is particularly important for students and this would help them flourish their reading competences. Meta-cognitive recognition (Nergis, 2013) is something to do with the awareness of students regarding their strengths and weaknesses from which they are able to figure out what are needed to improve their reading and other competences. In the end, however, apart from proposed arguments about how to

improve reading competences of students, reading practices are the best ways to improve ones' reading competences.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was designed as a library- based research. Bryman (2004) elaborates that research design reflect priority made for a research process. It means that the framework of research needs to provide a systematic direction for the researcher to map out which works come first and which come later. Hence, the direction of the research becomes clear beforehand.

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design (Lichtman, 2010: 12-19 and Ruslin, 2017: 119; Ruslin et al, 2022). With a library research approach, this study aims to examine and narrate data related to concepts, thoughts and rules regarding the issues related to reading competences of high school students in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The study employed library resources to collect data regarding the issues and practices of reading amongst high school students (Zed, 2004: 2-3). The data were derived from different resources which could be in the form of books, journals, proceedings, and handbooks that are relevant to the issues being investigated. Data collection was carried out through a process of conceptualizing and observing various phenomena in reading in Central Sulawesi. The data collected was then mapped out, analyzed and interactively triangulated. This technique was used to ensure relevance and validity of the data in order to properly address the questions raised up in the research.

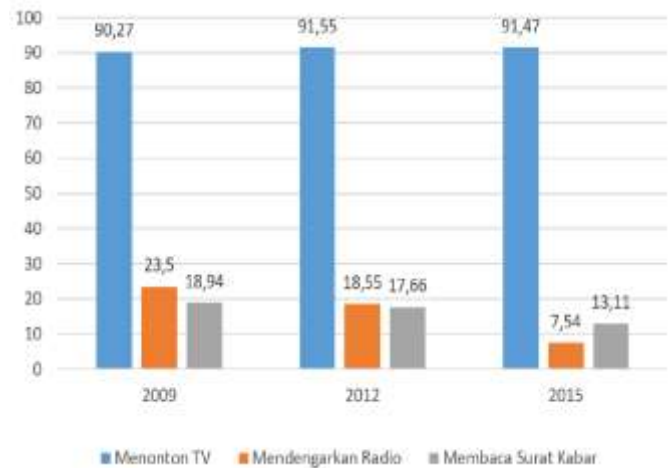
IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

IV.1 Literacy in Central Sulawesi

Based on the data released by Central Statistical Bureau of Indonesia (2007), it was found that those of aged 15 years and above who read newspapers on Sunday stood at 55,11%. Whilst 29,22 % of them read magazines, followed by 16,72 % read short stories. Those who read school textbooks reached 44,28%, and the rest of the readers, that is 21,07% read scientific books. The Forum Taman Bacaan Masyarakat (FTBM) of Central Sulawesi Indonesia, a non-government organization which especially cares literacy in the province notes that reading interest of people in this province is very low. The national survey on social and economy held by the National Statistical Bureau (BPS) in 2018 shows that the percentage of reading interest of people in Central Sulawesi stood at 39.11% or ranked 31 out of 34 provinces in the republic.

In the national level, the trend was even worse than expected. The percentage of population who watches TV is far higher than those who listens to the radio and reads newspapers. Within two to five years' time, i.e. 18.94% in 2009 and 17.66 in 2012, the trend went down steadfastly. In 2015, Central Statistical Bureau of Indonesia noted that the percentage of the population who read newspapers went down even further standing at 13.11% (Statistik Sosial Budaya -

BPS 2015). This report has not yet covered their reading activities in weekends. This percentage clearly implies that students in general have a very low reading interest.

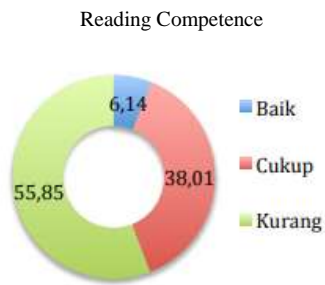


Percentage of Population Aged 10 above Which Could Access Media

Resources: Social Culture Statistic 2015

Ministry of National Education of Indonesia – Kemendikbud RI notes that there are at least three main factors why students in Indonesia have remarkably low level of literacy. First, the access provided at schools is very limited. In most cases, access of students to reading resources such as newspapers, magazines, and fiction books are very limited. This especially occurs at schools that are hardly reached by available transportations like cars or other vehicles. Second, our society has a limited access to any reading resource which consequently impedes adequate reading provisions for children. In addition, poor reading behaviors of children lead to the unfinished literacy problem of the republic (Kemendikbud, 2019). In fact, Miller and McKenna (2016) stress out the importance of access to literacy in order for people to gain reading competence gradually.

Data released by Lembaga Penjaminan Mutu Pendidikan – LPMP, a local education quality assurance institution in Central Sulawesi, reflecting on the results of the National Examination – Ujian Nasional in Bahasa Indonesia (subject being used for looking at reading competences) in 2019 shows that reading competences of students in general is far from being expected. The data indicates that 6.14 % of the total examinees under the survey achieved a good reading competence.



Level of Reading Competences of Students based on a Survey of The Assessment of Indonesian Students Competence - Asesmen Kompetensi Siswa Indonesia (AKSI) 2018/2019

Source: Strategic Plan of Quality Assurance Organization of Central Sulawesi (Rencana Strategis LPMP Sulawesi Tengah) 2020 - 2024

Referring to statistical data about literacy competency released by the Regional Statistic Bureau in 2006 aged 10 and above, the percentage of the people who can read and write only Latin written symbol stood up at 73.58; 20.03% can read both Latin and other written symbols (for example, Arabic and local written symbols); while 1.76 % just read other symbols; and the rest, i.e. 4.63% are illiterates. Although these data were rough general pictures of literacy competences of the people in this region, the data suggest that there are lots to be done to improve literacy competences of the people especially those who are at the school ages. The data presented has not yet drawn the literacy conditions amongst the people in terms of whether or not they engage in reading or writing activities. Furthermore, it has also not at all provided clear information of classroom literacy condition, particularly the literacy conditions in the High schools in this region. However, this data is at least used as a stand point to presuppose about the literacy conditions which might happen in the classroom.

IV.2 The National Plan for the Improvement on the Educational Services

Indonesian Educational Constitution No 20, 2003, Chapter 4 Verse 5 states that reading is considered as a key to knowledge while books are knowledge resources. Yet, in practice this statement is still overlooked and remains as a dissonant discourse. In a sense, this statement is apparently far from being applicable. It might be too ideal to implement unless infrastructures are sufficiently available. At schools, reading books need to be sufficiently provided. However, schools in remote areas where transportations are scarcely available, text books are hardly found. Discrepancy of the books distribution becomes a wide-ranging issue. This issue is hardly noticed by the local education authority and therefore the gaps amongst those schools in terms of text books distribution are increasingly wider.

Another problem is text books provided by the government and distributed to schools are not interesting to students. Most of the books are textbooks which are too dreary for students to read. The experience of a researcher who has been teaching in three different secondary schools

suggests that most school libraries are full of untouched written documents. These situations were aggravated by discrepant distributions of the text books to schools due to transportation difficulties as many schools are out of reach for available public transports.

Besides, recruitment of teachers at any level of educations is still ill-organized. Many teachers are solely recruited on the basis of their formal qualifications they earn without considering their skills, experiences, and achievements required to do the job of teaching. Based on the empirical observations of the researchers, there were cases where teachers were recruited due to their personal approaches to policy makers they have acquainted with in the local educational departments.

Although there are a number of unsolved problems encountered, many attempts have been done by the government in improving educational qualities. The curriculum as one of the most important issues related to the educational development has been revised. As far as I am concerned in the last ten years, the national curriculum in Indonesia has been undertaking three revisions. First revision was made in 1999 (1999 Supplement Curriculum) to supply the previous 1994 Curriculum which were assumed not able to accommodate students' needs. This curriculum revitalized the extent of emphasis to assure that it can accommodate students' needs. Second revision was conducted in 2000 in which competence development was primarily emphasized. This curriculum was labeled as a competence-based curriculum which then developed and revitalized in the 2004 curriculum. The stressing point of this current curriculum is the development of students' competence on the basis of prescribed criteria required for them to achieve. This curriculum is also technological-oriented in a sense that by implementing it in the teaching and learning process, students are required to be able to self-access information using information technology such as TV, personal computer, internet, etc. In relation to this, Kress (2000) stresses that the curriculum of the future must engender creativity and innovation and subjects must reflect global demands. Increasingly, educators will be forced to think in terms of "literacies". Literacy will move from written to visual mediums such as TV, Personal Computer, play station and Internet.

Apart from the curriculum development, the government of Indonesia currently released the most promising program of Education Ministry, i.e. on line books which were set free for students to access. This program is apparently very helpful to both students and teachers. To students, with the presence of this free on line books, they can save their expenses for buying textbooks which could be three times cheaper than that of those textbooks. For teachers, they are advantaged of these books since most students could be well-prepared before coming to the classroom.

IV.3 Issues about Literacy and its Development in Indonesia

Indonesia has a reading problem. Despite a reported 95% adult literacy rate, most available evidence suggests that the ability of the average Indonesian adult to understand and make use of written information is shockingly low (Head Foundation, 2017). Indonesia's reading problem matters because literacy is vital for navigating daily life, accessing jobs and services, participating in political processes, and the sheer pleasure and enrichment that reading can bring.

The importance of literacy is only amplified by technological change. In our networked age, our reading 'bandwidth' is critical. Societies of skilled readers – those able to read, understand, and crucially, evaluate and filter information – will be able to reap the benefits of online resources, while the less well equipped will flounder. Matraji (VOI, 2019) said that the literacy program must be intensified and must be a priority. This is because the literacy program has only been used as a side program so far. "Therefore, the impact is not optimal. Minister of Education and Culture of Indonesia, Makarim (VOI, 2019) did not deny the decline in the reading interest of Indonesian students. He also agreed that Indonesia is currently experiencing a literacy crisis. According to Makarim (VOI, 2019), the cause of Indonesia experiencing a literacy crisis is the lack of a reading culture among children. Makarim (VOI, 2019) argues that the involvement of parents is essential in fulfilling children's literacy from an early age. "The most important thing for literacy is from parents. The impact of parents can be greater than teachers," said Makarim (VOI, 2019) when releasing PISA 2018.

Various factors are suspected of causing the low literacy culture, but reading habits are considered the primary and fundamental factor. Even though, one of the efforts to improve the quality of human resources so that they can quickly adapt to global developments that cover various aspects of human life is to foster a society that likes to read. In fact, people still consider reading activities to pass the time, not to fill time intentionally. This means that reading activities have not become a habit but more of 'fad' activities (Permatasari, 2015).

Related to the accessibility of existing facilities, low literacy in Indonesia was caused several factors as follows:

1. School environment

a. The development of reading skills is still perceived as part of the responsibility of language subjects only. Based on the curriculum perspective, it is true that reading is one of the competencies that must be taught in the language subject, so teachers of other subjects do not feel the need to participate in developing reading comprehension skills (Tahmidaten and Krismanto, 2020).

b. The elementary school learning process still does not utilize the various and appropriate models, methods,

strategies, and learning media for learning reading comprehension.

In terms of learning methods and teaching materials used in schools, they still do not facilitate the teaching of reading comprehension. The learning model is still monotonous in reading activities and then answering questions under the reading or LKS so that reading learning activities become boring and tend to be uninteresting (Tahmidaten and Krismanto, 2020).

c. Reading materials, learning activities, and practice/evaluation questions that exist in teaching materials in schools tend to still dwell on low-order thinking skills. One of the elements of change in the 2013 (Haniah and setiawan, 2020; Tajudin and Chinnappan, 2020) curriculum is strengthening the learning process and higher-order thinking, but in reality, there are still many teachers who do not understand this.

d. The infrastructure and services of the school library have not been maximized as a center for developing students' reading skills. Sourced from BPS (2017) data, in general, library availability has not reached one hundred percent or even less than 80%.

2. Outside the School Environment

a. Increased use of electronic information technology.

In this digital era, the consumption of social media is very influential. Animations, videos, and audio are more interesting, especially with the increasing development of graphics, making reading that is only in the form of writing or lettering no longer interesting (Vlieghe et al., 2016).

b. The development of 'thumb' technology (mobile phones, internet) has shifted human interest in books.

The emergence of communication devices called hand-phones that offer various cheap communication programs is one of the causes of a person's low willingness to read because people spend more time sending SMS and chatting via cellphones than spending time reading (Warnick, 2001 and Witanto, 2018).

c. Many families have not instilled the tradition of compulsory reading.

To form children who have the ability to love reading, they must start from the child's closest environment, namely the family. Because it is in the family that children will imitate what has become the habit of family members, especially parents. But the reality that happens is that most parents, especially mothers of Indonesian children, prefer to watch TV rather than read books to their children at (Witanto, 2018; Shih and Reynolds, 2018).

d. The affordability of people's purchasing power for books.

In addition to the fact that the price of books is still relatively expensive, the public has not been able to directly feel the benefits that can be obtained from reading a lot, it is proven that there has been no socialization that people who read a lot will have a better life and a lot of money. People consider books, not a necessity, the price of books exceeds the price of basic necessities and the benefits of buying books are not comparable to the benefits of buying groceries (Witanto, 2018).

V. DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings, it was identified that there were a number of factors considered to have affected reading competences of high school students in Central Sulawesi. First, it is important to note that traditionally, students lack reading resources. In many cases, a great number of schools in Indonesia and Central Sulawesi in particular, due to poor transportation reaches, have not yet obtained adequate reading resources (Kemendikbud, 2019). In fact, Hedge (2003), Miller and McKenna (2016), and Shakil (2020) elaborated that the access to reading resources strongly contributed to the gradual improvement of people's reading competences. The other factor identified to have lowered reading competences of students in high schools is the rapid change of curriculum. Kress (2000), stresses that the curriculum of the future must engender creativity and innovation and subjects must reflect global demands. Increasingly, educators will be forced to think in terms of "literacies" (see Haniah and setiawan, 2020; Tajudin and Chinnappan, 2020).

In a similar tone, Shakil (2020) reflecting on the case of Pakistan government schools, highlighted the importance of quality reading resources and deliveries provided for students. This suggests that although the curriculum requires the quantity of reading activities for students, it is important for school stakeholders in particular to be aware about qualities of reading activities provided for students. This is important since a comprehensive and well-designed training are needed not only for students but also for teachers of English (Shakil, 2020 and Tahmidaten and Krismanto, 2020). Another suggested way of improving reading competences of students is a type of competition in reading (Shakil, 2020). In the case of Pakistan government schools, the absence of regular competitions in reading leads to the low competences of reading amongst students. Moreover, as in the case of Pakistan government schools, the libraries in most high schools in Central Sulawesi have not yet been fully functional (Shakil, 2020).

According to Witanto (2018), Shih and Reynolds (2018), and Shakil (2020), family tradition is another important factor for students to develop their reading competences. Shakil (2020) observed that even educated parents do not read newspapers at home. This condition is very much the same as parents in general in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. In addition, the development of 'thumb' technology

(mobile phones, internet) has shifted human interest in books (Witanto, 2018 and Warnick, 2001). The culture of mobile phones in modern days has shifted the ways students learn English. In most cases, young students (people) prefer to read from their mobile phones instead of going to the traditional libraries to read books. These evidences are prevalent in most high schools not only in city schools but also those schools in remote areas as long as the internet connections available. This thumb technology has diminished the role of the printed texts available in schools today (Witanto, 2018).

Despite all the factors elaborated, reading, comprehending, and thinking with language (especially English) and the printed words are cultural phenomena. The extent of their development is affected by home and family circumstances, traditions, habits, and cultures and the encouragement of basic habits and attitudes in kindergarten and the early grades, opportunities and social support for the development of effective skills and strategies in later life (Anderson, 1985: 07). The argument emphasizes two important factors that have strong connections to the development of students' reading competences. The first factor is the family values and traditions in relation to the issue of reading. The second factor is the process of instilling the habits of reading amongst children. These two factors contribute to the development of students' reading competences in later life.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research findings, reading competences of high school students in Central Sulawesi have been affected by a great deal of factors. These cover the lack reading resources at schools, the rapid change of curriculum, the existence of thumb technology amongst students, and the family tradition and culture. Nevertheless, the involvement of parents (family tradition and culture) is the most essential factor in building students' literacy from the early age. The results of the research suggests that as students now live in the era of advanced communication and information technologies, provisions of these technological-based learning devices are inevitable in high schools. Moreover, the local education authorities urgently need to provide adequate reading text books and other interesting reading materials to students. In addition, it is particularly essential to inform teachers and other educational stakeholders to create learning atmospheres in which students are interested in reading activities from which they could develop their reading cultures for the future.

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