

Reading Comprehension in the TOEFL PBT: Which Sub-Skill deserves more Intensive Training?

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Abstract

Studies have shown that reading comprehension is the most difficult section of the Paper-Based Test (PBT) TOEFL. Therefore, this research aimed to identify which sub-skill in reading comprehension poses the greatest challenges for the students and how this sub-skill correlates to other reading comprehension sub-skills. To achieve this purpose, this research utilized both qualitative and quantitative approaches. To collect the data, 33 advanced EFL undergraduate students and fresh graduates at Syiah Kuala University, Indonesia, were recruited to sit a PBT TOEFL reading comprehension test, comprising 50 multiple choice questions to be completed in 55 minutes. The data were analyzed in two stages. In the first stage, the analysis involved descriptive statistics to find out which subskill was more problematic. Furthermore, inferential statistics was used in the second stage using Kruskal-Wallis sum test and Spearman's correlation to seek significant evidence that each subskill is different from another and to find out how the most problematic subskill correlates to others. The results showed that the problems in reading comprehension were divided into three levels. Vocabulary was in level 1, which was the most problematic subskill, and level 2 consisted of the main idea, detail information, and inference. The least problematic subskill was reference, i.e. level 3. In addition, vocabulary correlated to all other subskills except the main idea. Therefore, the universities need to dedicate more time in Reading Comprehension courses for difficult reading comprehension sub-skill. In addition, since vocabulary is a very fundamental but also the most problematic sub-skill which correlated to almost all other subskills, a separate vocabulary development course needs to be offered for the students.

Keywords: TOEFL, reading comprehension sub-skills, vocabulary, advanced EFL learners

Introduction

Several aspects need to be considered in measuring English proficiency, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. There are many official language tests for non-native English speakers and one of them is TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language). There are three kinds of TOEFL tests, i.e., internet-based TOEFL, paper-based TOEFL (PBT TOEFL) and computer-based TOEFL. Due to its high rate of success in predicting the score, many institutions administer language tests similar to PBT TOEFL, referred to as a “TOEFL-like test”, “TOEFL Prediction”, or “TOEFL equivalent” (Sugeng et al., 2012). The current format of PBT TOEFL consists of three sections – listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension.

Obtaining a certain score on the TOEFL is a requirement for those who want to study in English-speaking countries, and the score is set by the respective institutions. In the U.S., most world-renowned universities require their applicants to have a score of at least 600 (Shanks, 2004). To enroll in an international academic training program, students need to have at least 480 (Ng, 2007, p. 20). The TOEFL score required for Fulbright and Chevening scholarships is 550.

In Indonesia, TOEFL is required mostly in academic fields. Some universities, such as Tanjungpura University, require their students to acquire a minimum TOEFL score in order to graduate (Salam et al., 2012), Diponegoro University (Sugeng et al., 2012) State Polytechnic of Padang (Marzuki, 2008), STKIP PGRI of West Sumatera (Mayuasti, 2013), Pasir Pengaraian University (Antoni, 2014), and Palangka Raya State Islamic College (Sabarun, 2012, p. 3) require their students to obtain a minimum score of 400 for graduation. At Syiah Kuala University in Aceh, the score requirement ranges from 450 to 477 depending on varying department regulations.

Students in Indonesia start learning English at the elementary school level (Elfiondri, 2018). Experts have provided many strategies in language learning to help teachers improve their students' English proficiency ranging from memory strategies to social strategies (Paredes, 2010, p. 19; Zhou, 2010). By the time students start university, they have already learned the language for more than ten years. Therefore, students majoring in English in the university level should have obtained an advanced level of English proficiency. However, the data collected by the Language Center of Syiah Kuala University in 2016 revealed that only 4% of the senior students could get the required graduation score. The percentage is higher for students majoring in English, i.e. 30%. Nevertheless, this number is still far from satisfactory considering that they have been learning English, exposed to English texts and listening to English audio for at least four years.

Among the three language skills tested in the TOEFL, reading comprehension is the most important section (Anjomshoa & Zamanian, 2014). At the same time, that section is also the most difficult according to the preliminary data from Syiah Kuala University. Previous researchers also found that EFL students in other Indonesian universities had the same problems (Gani et al., 2016; Pammu et al., 2014). Similar results were discovered in other countries such as China (Chern, 1985; Ling, 2011), Saudi Arabia (Alamin & Ahmed, 2013; O'Sullivan, 2004), and Iran (Kheirzadeh & Tavakoli, 2012). This problem should be solved by focusing on reading comprehension sub-skills in the classroom, with the most difficult sub-skills as the core of the teaching.

However, only a small amount of research has addressed which sub-skill is most problematic and how this most problematic sub-skill correlates to other sub-skills. Previous research on TOEFL investigated the best strategies to increase reading comprehension scores such as schemata (Sutarsyah, 2009) or specific sub-skills such as vocabulary (Anjomshoa & Zamanian, 2014; Kheirzadeh & Tavakoli, 2012). Therefore, it is essential to find out the most complicated sub-skill experienced by EFL learners and how it correlates to other sub-skills. Those findings may be the key to helping English lecturers successfully teach reading comprehension classes and to helping students obtain a higher English proficiency level in reading comprehension.

Review of Literature

Reading is a *complex* (Artuso & Palladino, 2016; Olmez, 2016) and *cultural skill* that people frequently exercise (Stutz et al., 2016; Wallot, 2016). However, reading is not only a complex but also a *perceptive* skill, since it depends on readers' ways of thinking (Wallot, 2016). Reading comprehension is gained through the complete understanding of meaning that relates to the subject (Royanto, 2012). It is rather challenging because readers must attempt many interpretations of the authors' true intentions (Karimi & Alibakhshi, 2014, p. 97). The level of understanding for reading can be measured through several standardized tests, among which is the widely used TOEFL.

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

TOEFL is a standardized test to measure nonnative speakers of English (Philips, 2001, p. 13), which was introduced in 1960 (ETS, 2011, p. 2). The first type of TOEFL was the Computer Based Test (CBT), which has four sections: listening, structure, writing, and reading. The scores range from 0 – 300. The CBT TOEFL was later upgraded to the internet Based TOEFL (iBT) due to language theories advancement, especially in the field of Language Testing (ETS, 2010, p. 1). The iBT has four sections: reading, listening, speaking, and writing, and, unlike the other types of TOEFL tests, note-taking is allowed in the iBT. The score ranges from 0 – 120 (ETS, 2007a, p. 2). The third type is the Paper-based TOEFL

(PBT TOEFL), which is divided into three sections (ETS, 2007b, p. 11). The test has 140 questions - 50 for listening comprehension, 40 for structure and written expressions, and 50 for reading comprehension, which consists of 5 passages (Shanks, 2004). Additionally, for the International PBT TOEFL, there is also a writing section (Sharpe, 2004, p. 12). The writing section is given before the other sections in the form of a specific topic prompt, and it must be completed in 30 minutes. The score for the PBT TOEFL ranges between 310 and 677.

TOEFL – Like Test

The TOEFL-Like Test does not have any significant differences in feature compared to the PBT TOEFL except that it does not have a writing section. According to previous research, this type of test is qualified to predict English proficiency (Sugeng et al., 2012, p. 191). Researchers can use this type of test to collect their research data (Herwandari et al., 2012, p. 184). This test is usually obtained from TOEFL preparation books; however, the difficulty level is sometimes different from that of the real TOEFL. Mustafa (2015) suggests the use of corpora in designing a structure and written expression test as an alternative procedure for the design of reliable TOEFL reading test material that, according to Mustafa and Apriadi (2016), better matches the level of a real ETS-produced PBT TOEFL.

Reading Comprehension in the TOEFL Test

The reading comprehension section consists of 50 multiple-choice questions, with 8-11 questions for each passage of 200 – 300 words. The given questions vary but mostly focus on main ideas, stated or unstated details, vocabulary, pronouns, and inference. The topic in each passage consists of different kinds of subjects in order to avoid favoritism toward certain themes (ETS, 2000, p. 8).

Main Idea Questions

The main idea can be isolated in all the passages since it is the most important element that states the author's intention (Pierce & Kinsell, 2008). In the PBT TOEFL, the examinees are asked mostly about the "topic", "title", "primary idea", or "main idea".

Stated Details

The examinees are prompted to find a specific piece of information instead of defining all of the information in a passage (Philips, 2001, p. 379). The questions are presented in a sequence that mirrors how they appear in the text and the answers share the same ideas of the passage though they do not necessarily use the same words (Philips, 2001, p. 379). In order to be able to answer these questions, the examinees can reread the questions after reading the passage (Hill, 2006, p. 21).

Unstated Detail Questions

The examinees have to find information that is not explicit in the passage (Philips, 2001, p. 385). The correct answer for this type of questions is false information according to the passage. Careful reading is essential to correctly answer these questions (Hill, 2006, p. 22).

Pronoun Referent Questions

The examinees have to find the designated pronoun of a specific noun (Philips, 2001, p. 388). The author uses referents in order to enhance word choice and variation (Gallagher, 2005, p. 44). The pronoun itself may be before or after the antecedent is mentioned and can even be in a different sentence. Transition and connecting words can be used as clues for this type of question (Gear & Gear, 2002, p. 317).

Inference Questions

In this type of question, the examinees have to deduce information from a passage. These questions can be recognized from the presence of words such as "inferred", "implied", "likely", or "probably" (Philips, 2001, p. 398). This question requires sharp reading skills, previous knowledge, and good memorization skills (Broek et al., 2001, p. 1081). Hill (2006) suggested that the answer to this question will not be different from the passage's main idea.

Vocabulary Questions

This type of question covers about 20% of the total questions in the TOEFL test, which suggests that vocabulary load and knowledge in reading are crucial (Pyle, 2001, p. 50). Vocabulary is an important feature in reading (Nation & Beglar,

2007) because it closely correlates with comprehension (Kulaç & Walters, 2016, p. 487). Less familiar words are usually used in the test. Chesla (2002, p. 34) suggests a careful examination of the main ideas surrounding the word and trying every option to replace it, until the best possible word substitution is found.

The Problems in Reading Comprehension

Inadequate Vocabulary Size

Previous research has found that vocabulary was a problematic subject in reading (Karabuga & Kaya, 2013, p. 625). Approximately 9,000 words are needed for ESL students to comprehend a reading text and 7,000 words to comprehend a conversation (Nation, 2006). The average vocabulary size of EFL students is between 1,000 and 4,000 words (Schmitt et al., 2011, p. 27). Finding new words several times in different kinds of texts and subjects is the best strategy to memorize new words (Nation, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, utilizing “extensive reading” can improve vocabulary size (Safaeia & Bulca, 2013, p. 595).

Slow Reading

Research has revealed that most students read without paying much attention to time (Soemantri, 2011, p. 75). Time management is difficult if they are unable to comprehend a text and focus too much on the main idea or keywords. Therefore, the students who run out of time are unable to find the right answer, leading to blind guessing, which is not a good reading strategy (Dollinger & Clark, 2012).

Lack of Strategy

A good reader uses many strategies when it comes to reading (Yukselir, 2014, p. 67). However, half of the participants in the research conducted by AD et al. (2014, p. 6) did not prepare good strategies for taking a reading test, resulting in poor performance in reading.

Background Knowledge

Combining information from a text and previous knowledge contributes to better understanding of a passage (Koda, 2005, p. 4). Use of previous knowledge is an important strategy for comprehending reading texts (Smit et al., 2017; Sullivan & Puntambekar, 2015, p. 306). However, texts are from various disciplines; therefore, the test takers do not necessarily have access to background knowledge for most of the passages, nor is it designed in a way that demands background knowledge.

Grammar

EFL students are struggling in comprehension because they are unable to understand complex grammar (Yang & Lin, 2015, p. 127). It has been proven that better grammar correlates with better reading comprehension (Akbari, 2014, p. 4). The structure in a passage contributes to the confusion of the test takers when they choose from options that look very much alike (Freedle & Kostin, 1993, p. 136).

Research Methods

This study was conducted at Syiah Kuala University, Banda Aceh, Indonesia. The respondents were 33 EFL advanced learners who had already completed courses in all of the language skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) in the English Language Teaching Department. To collect the data, a reading comprehension test was used to find out which reading sub-skills the students found most difficult to answer correctly. The test was set based on an ETS – designed TOEFL test in reading comprehension. The reading test in the TOEFL test consists of 50 questions. The questions contain six sub-skills in reading comprehension, which were dispersed. Table 1 shows the distribution of sub-skills in each passage.

Table 1. Sub-skill distribution in test

Sub-skills	Passage 1	Passage 2	Passage 3	Passage 4	Passage 5
Vocabulary	3	4	3	2	2
Inference	1	2	3	1	3
Stated Detail	2	2	2	2	1

Unstated Detail	1	1	0	1	1
Main Idea	0	1	0	2	1
Reference	2	2	1	2	2
Total	9	12	9	10	10

To answer the question of which sub-skill is the most problematic, the authors plotted the data in a boxplot chart and based their conclusion on the mean of correct answer percentage for each sub-skill. In addition, to find out whether the results of each sub-skill tested were significantly different from one another, the Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test, which is a nonparametric alternative test for ANOVA, was used. This test was selected because there was significant evidence that the data violated the assumption of normal distribution based on Shapiro Wilk test ($W = 0.96566$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000478$).

The last analysis is a correlation analysis to see whether the most problematic sub-skill correlates to other sub-skills. The correlation was calculated by using Spearman's rank correlation rho, and the significance was decided at $\alpha = 0.05$.

Results

The number of correct answers for each sub-skill was converted into percentages. The summary of the percentage of the correct answers obtained by students for each reading skills is presented in the descriptive statistic table below.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Sub-skill	Min	Med	Max	Mean	sd	Shapiro Wilk Test	
						SW	p-value
Main idea	0.25	0.75	1.00	0.73	0.21	0.85	0.000
Stated detail	0.22	0.67	1.00	0.69	0.20	0.95	0.131
Unstated detail	0.00	0.75	1.00	0.75	0.26	0.83	0.000
Referent	0.56	0.89	1.00	0.89	0.13	0.80	0.000
Inference	0.20	0.70	1.00	0.67	0.23	0.94	0.897
Vocabulary	0.14	0.57	0.93	0.59	0.19	0.97	0.452

The average percentage of correct answers for each sub-skill can be determined based on the following boxplot chart. The sub-skills in the chart are sorted based on the median of the data.

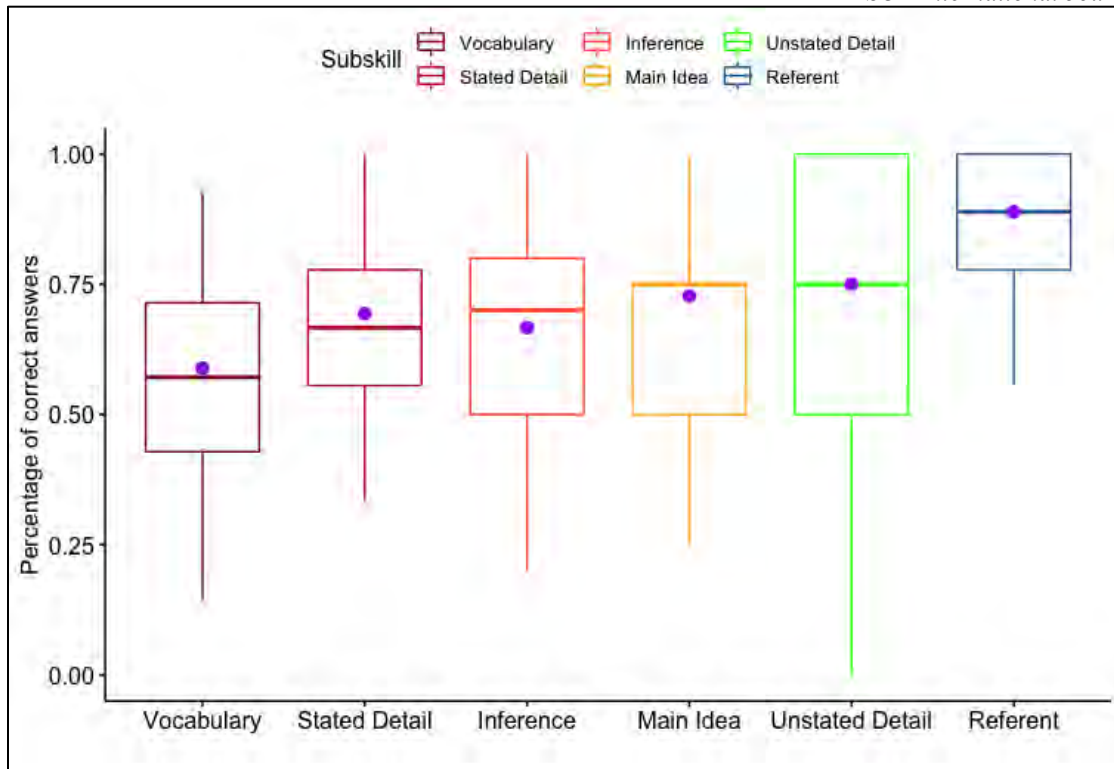


Chart 1. Average percentage of correct answers for each sub-skill

The horizontal line located near the middle of each box represents the median of the data. The means are represented by the purple-filled small squares in the boxplots. According to these squares, vocabulary was the most difficult sub-skill for the students. The next four sub-skills were not very different from one another. In contrast, questions in the reference sub-skill were the easiest questions. The gap between vocabulary and reference is approximately 29%.

To find out whether the sub-skills are significantly different from one another, or the differences happened by chance, a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test was performed. The test was also performed with the four middle sub-skills separately (Stated Detail, Inferences, Main Idea, and Unstated Details) to validate our hypothesis that the means were similar (H_0). The hypothesis should be rejected if the p-value is not less than 0.05.

Table 3. Significance test for differences in sub-skills

Sub-skills	KW	df	p-value
All sub-skills	36.186	5	0.0000
Four middle sub-skills	02.511	3	0.4733

Table 3 shows that there was significant evidence that the differences observed in Chart 1 did not happen by chance. However, the differences among the four middle sub-skills were not significant (p -value > 0.05). These results are discussed in the following section.

To find out whether vocabulary correlates with other sub-skills, the correlation test by using either Pearson's product-moment correlation or Spearman's rank correlation rho was performed, depending on the data distribution. Data for vocabulary was found to be normally distributed ($W = 0.96897$, p -value = 0.4522); therefore, Pearson's product-moment correlation could be used for other variables if they were normally distributed. The results of normality tests and correlation analyses are provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlations between vocabulary sub-skill and other sub-skills

Correlation between vocabulary and	Shapiro Wilk Test		S/t*	rho/cor*	p-value
	SW	p-value			
Stated Detail	0.949	0.131	2.747*	0.442*	0.009
Inference	0.944	0.089	3.747*	0.558*	0.001
Unstated Detail	0.833	0.000	2586.6	0.568	0.001
Main Idea	0.854	0.000	5000.6	0.164	0.361
Reference	0.803	0.000	3468.9	0.420	0.015

Table 4 shows that Pearson's product-moment correlation (t, cor) can be used for only two variables. The results of correlation analyses revealed that only then Main Idea sub-skill was not correlated to the Vocabulary sub-skill, while others were significantly correlated with varying correlation levels.

Discussion

Based on the statistical calculations presented in the previous section, the difficulty levels of reading sub-skills can be categorized into three levels. The most difficult sub-skill (level 1) is vocabulary followed by four sub-skills (level 2), which are in the same level of difficulty, which includes Stated Detail, Inferences, Main Idea, and Unstated Details. Furthermore, the least difficult sub-skill (level 3) is the referent.

The most difficult sub-skill questions, which are vocabulary, were answered correctly 59% of the time on average. This result was least expected, considering that the students have been exposed to various English texts, written and spoken, for three years at the university. This result suggests that the students' vocabulary load is less than 4,500 (Chujo & Oghigian, 2009, p. 13), which means that they could not guess the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary. Considering a research study conducted by Na and Nation (1985), this result is even more alarming. One of the factors contributing to small vocabulary size was uncontrolled vocabulary learning, i.e. students were not taught vocabulary based on importance, transferability, and usefulness for generative study (Aziez & Aziez, 2018, p. 75). Students can only guess unfamiliar vocabulary when they know 95% of the vocabulary in the text, which is only possible when the vocabulary load includes the first 3,000 most frequently used words. Therefore, we can conclude that the students' vocabulary size is very low.

Regarding comprehension, the students with larger vocabulary size will have less difficulty in comprehending a text. Thus, the reading process will be much easier and lead to better comprehension. One of the problems for readers when they focus on particular vocabulary rather than on content. According to Mehrdad et al. (2012, p. 5), readers spend a lot of time focusing on new vocabulary, which is an ineffective strategy since time is of the essence. Furthermore, students who have inadequate vocabulary can be misled by unfamiliar words and thus misunderstand the author's points.

Within level 2 is inference which students could answer correctly 67% of the time on average. EFL students were unable to make inference due to its implicit nature (Cain & Oakhill, 1999, p. 1). Students were unlikely to read between the lines in order to comprehend the implicit meaning of the text. In addition, inference requires large vocabulary loads (Cain & Oakhill, 2014, p. 1). Moreover, vocabulary involves a good working memory which can positively influence high-level reading abilities, such as making inferences (Varol & Erçetin, 2016, p. 4). However, Currie and Cain (2015, p. 13) found that working memory can only be helpful in making inference should it be supported by an adequate vocabulary. Therefore, the greater the vocabulary load, the greater the chance a reader has to make better inferences (Calvo, 2004).

Another sub-skill in level 2 is detail information, which is divided into stated and unstated details in the TOEFL test. The research results show that stated detail questions are more challenging (70%) compared to unstated detail counterparts (75%) although this difference was not supported by the statistical significance test. However, the percentages show that the students are more capable of answering these types of questions compared to questions in the vocabulary sub-skill. In fact, according to Mehrdad et al. (2012, p. 5), detail information questions are only difficult for beginner readers. However, the respondents in this research were advanced EFL learners. They have been found to use scanning and skimming as strategies in reading (Nordin et al., 2013, p. 4). These two strategies proved to effectively improve reading skill (Pan, 2009, p. 5). The sub-skills become less difficult with scanning, as it enables the readers to pinpoint specific information or keywords (Pammu et al., 2014, p. 5) in the text which were mentioned in the questions. In addition, skimming helps students use their time efficiently (Qanwal & Karim, 2014, p. 27). Time efficiency has been

found to correlate with the ability to find detail information (Maasum & Maarof, 2012, p. 2).

The other sub-skill in level 2 is main idea, which the students could answer correctly 73% of the time. This sub-skill is not the most difficult sub-skill for advanced EFL learners because to grasp the main idea of a text, the students are not required to understand every word, even every sentence. Instead, main idea requires readers to predict and make a hypothesis (Wilawan, 2012, p. 46). Wilawan (2012) proposed three skills that the students need to be taught to better predict the main idea of a text, i.e. global comprehension (understanding the general meaning of a text), local comprehension (having linguistic knowledge), explicit connective (knowing relationships between ideas), word relationship (knowing relationships between word forms), and self-monitoring (focusing attention on the text while reading). Because vocabulary is included in the linguistic knowledge, we can conclude that vocabulary is one of many components, and though perhaps not the most important component, required in understanding main ideas. These skills are also in line with the Main Idea Strategy proposed by Boudah (2013, p. 149).

Based on the research results and their interpretation, the most problematic sub-skill requiring more instruction is vocabulary, which has been claimed as the core of comprehension. Based on the correlation analysis, it correlates to all of the other sub-skills except main idea. Although this is an observational study where correlation should not be regarded as causation, the results showing that vocabulary appears to be the key to understanding a text, indicate causation. This conclusion suggests that when students have an adequate amount of vocabulary, their skills in understanding other sub-skills will significantly improve.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine the most problematic sub-skills in reading comprehension of academic English text among advanced EFL learners. Based on the results of descriptive statistical analysis, the most difficult sub-skill was vocabulary, followed by stated detail, inference, main idea, and unstated detail, while the least difficult sub-skill was reference. In addition, inferential statistics analysis revealed that the difficulty in reading comprehension was divided into three levels, with vocabulary in level 1 as the most difficult sub-skill, then detail information (stated and unstated details), main idea, and inference were in the moderate level, i.e. level 2. The third level was reference as the least difficult sub-skill. In addition, vocabulary, the most difficult sub-skill in reading comprehension correlated with the other subskills except main idea.

Pedagogical implication

This research has found that vocabulary was the most difficult subskill in reading comprehension, and that difficulty in most sub-skills was influenced by vocabulary. Pedagogically, these results imply that in order to achieve better understanding of an academic text, students need to be introduced to more vocabulary and motivated to practice using it. In addition, improving vocabulary has been proven to be one of the best ways to improve comprehension (Mustafa et al., 2019). Vocabulary level is categorized based on its frequency. Nation and Fountain (2000, p. 32) categorized vocabulary into the first 1,000 most frequently used words until the sixth 1,000 most common words. In order to understand a text, Hsueh-chao and Nation (2000, p. 409) suggest having a command of 3,000 of the most frequently used word families. In addition, texts in TOEFL are academic texts; therefore, students should be taught 500 lemmas in the Academic Vocabulary List proposed by Gardner and Davies (2014, p. 13). Therefore, it is suggested that students who want to increase their vocabulary size in the academic field must learn that particular list of words. With a strong vocabulary set in that category, students' reading comprehension, as well as their TOEFL scores, could potentially increase across the board. One of the most commonly-used, relaxed ways of improving vocabulary by advanced EFL learners was reading English novels (Muthalib et al., 2019, p. 173) and watching movies, the strategy which also works in reducing anxiety in learning (Elfiondri, 2018, p. 289).

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