

## The Initial Reading Comprehension Profile of EFL Learners

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### Abstract

Reading is important in EFL learning since it helps learners build their language acquisition as well as obtain knowledge and information. The goal of reading is comprehension. To develop EFL learners' reading comprehension, reading strategy used should be carefully chosen; and the strategy should consider the initial comprehension profile of the learners. The paper reports a study at finding out the initial reading comprehension profile of EFL learners. The study was conducted in Universitas Nasional Karangturi involving first semester students of English Education Department taking Engagement Reading class. This is a descriptive research with mixed method design. The data were in the form of students' scores collected by using reading test taken from Cambridge IELTS Academic Reading test. The data were then analysed by using statistical analysis. The study shows that the students' mean score is 4, which means they are at A2 level of English according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The students at this level are able to comprehend simple texts about issues that are familiar with language related to everyday activities with high-frequency words. Furthermore, based on the students' performance on each component of IELTS reading test, the study indicates that the students get the highest score on the component of reading for details (33.8%). It means that the students are at the literal level of reading comprehension.

**Keywords:** reading, reading comprehension, reading comprehension level, IELTS reading test.

### Introduction

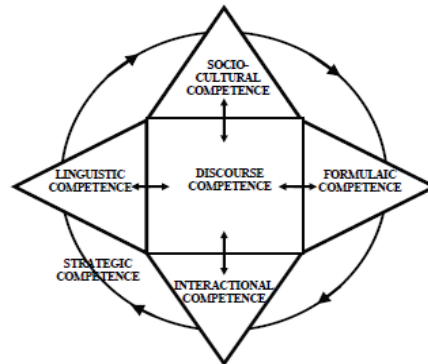
Reading is important in the success of language learning, including learning of English as a foreign language, since the activity can help learners improve their insight in English language (Ismail et al., 2017). Reading enables learners to get meaning and information through written text. During reading, learners actively construct meaning by connecting information from the written text with their previous knowledge (Suhendra et al., 2020). Thus, reading helps learners build their language acquisition as well as obtain knowledge and information, and this can be realised when learners understand written texts accurately. Due to the significance of reading, having good reading comprehension is crucial for learners of English as Foreign Language (EFL).

Reading comprehension is the process of making sense of words, sentences, and text in order to understand information presented in a written form (Febriani et al., 2019). The core of reading is on reading comprehension. Without comprehension, the goal of reading itself is not achieved. In order to have good reading comprehension, effective strategy to apply when reading needs to be selected carefully; and in choosing the strategy, the initial profile of EFL learners' reading comprehension should be taken into account. Hence, outlining reading comprehension of EFL learners is necessary. Based on the background of the study mentioned, the researcher conducted this research to find out the initial profile of EFL learners' reading comprehension. As the instrument of the research, the researcher chose IELTS reading test since it is considered as one of proficiency tests that is widely accepted by universities in the world.

## Literature Review

The goal of language learning is communication; therefore, in order to communicate successfully, language learners need to develop competence to use the language appropriately. The most current model of language competence is Communicative Competence by Celce Murcia. The diagram of communicative competence by Celce Murcia can be seen below:

Figure 1. *Communicative competence model by Celce Murcia (2007)*



The diagram above shows the components contained in the communicative competence. Those components are inseparable since they have their own important role. Therefore, if language learners would like to have communicative competence, they have to put more effort to learn all of those components supporting the communicative competence as a whole without leaving any components behind. The six components of communicative competence are as follow, (1) *linguistic competence*: the knowledge of language such as phonology, morphology, syntax; (2) *socio-cultural competence*: the knowledge of socio-cultural norms of target language; (3) *interactional competence*: the ability to use interactional sources; (4) *strategic competence*: the competence to solve problems that occur in communication; (5) *formulaic competence*: the ability to use English formulaic expressions; and (6) *discourse competence*: the heart of communicative competence, the competence to interpret and create texts involving the rules regarding cohesion and coherence (Murcia, 2007).

From the figure, it can be seen that there are several components supporting the communicative competence, and the very center of the diagram lies discourse competence. It can be concluded that discourse competence is regarded essential as other components support discourse competence, the core of communicative competence. Moreover, it also can be assumed that language learners who have excellent discourse competence are able to communicate effectively and appropriately. Further, discourse competence is reflected in learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

In this study, the focus is in the reading ability of the language learners since learners' language acquisition is strongly associated with their reading competence for it gives sufficient ability to build their lexical resource. It is important that language learners need to have abundant lexical resource to support their communication. Lexical resource plays as the core of communication where the language learners can choose to use certain expressions in the communication process. Therefore, it can be said that lexical resource is the language learners' resource in communication.

Reading has positive effect on students' vocabulary knowledge as incidental vocabulary occurs through reading (Brown, 2008). The more the learners read, the better they acquire language. Moreover, by reading, learners combine information from a text and their background knowledge to construct meaning (Anderson, 2008). In line with this idea, Day and Bamford (1998) state that reading is drawing meaning from a written text, so the readers know the detailed content of the text. Therefore, it can be concluded that reading is the activity that requires learners to actively recognise words and comprehend the meaning of written texts.

Reading cannot be separated from comprehension. Oberholzer (2005) states “understanding the reading text is far more important than knowing the mechanical skill of reading. Without comprehension, reading does not serve its objective.” Readers must use the information they already have to process, view, organise and focus on the incoming information they get from the text in order to comprehend and interpret texts. Efficient interpretation of text involves combining the skills of word recognition, linking new information to prior knowledge, and implementing appropriate strategies, such as locating the main idea, linking, questioning, inferring and predicting (Westwood, 2001). Furthermore, according to Westwood, there are four levels of reading comprehension; they are literal level, inferential level, critical level and creative level. This idea is in line with the statement of Heilman et.al (1981) that identifies the four comprehension level as follows:

1. Literal level

At the literal level, the reader understands basic facts. Questions to assess this level are factual and detailed. At this level, the reader understands meanings of words, recalls ideas that are stated explicitly in his/her own words, understands grammatical clue, and recognises sequence of information presented in the text.

2. Interpretive level

At the interpretive level, the reader is able to read beyond the literal words in the written texts. This level requires the reader to draw conclusions based on implied information in the text. This involves reasoning the details provided to understand the writer’s tone, purpose and attitude and deducing factual information, main ideas and connections that are not indicated explicitly.

3. Critical level

At the critical level, the reader evaluates the information and language use of the writer to give guidance to reader’s interpretation. At this stage, the reader reacts to information in a text, analyses and evaluates the quality of written information.

4. Creative level

At the critical level, the reader uses the information stated to develop new ideas. In other words, this level promotes the reader to new and original thinking. Questions to assess this level might be open-ended which require the reader’s own knowledge, view and value.

Reading comprehension is a process motivated by interest, where the goal of reading might change over time. Therefore, comprehending a text needs some process. When reading, a reader should preview the text, make assumptions about it, set the goal of reading by asking questions and choose effective strategies before reading any text. In addition, the reader should use techniques for understanding text: paraphrasing, combining new information with previous knowledge, tracking and continuing to predict or question (Blachowicz and Ogle, 2008). Therefore, to become a good reader, a reader needs to fully understand and make sense of the text they are reading. Good readers make predictions, read actively and selectively, draw on prior information and questions, and assess the text and the author (Duke and Pearson, 2002). Good readers also understand the objective of the text they read, observe their own understanding and can change their own reading strategies (Konza, 2011).

To become a good reader, a learner should master micro skills and macro skills of reading as well. According to Brown (2004), there are seven micro skills of reading: (1) discriminating among distinctive graphemes and orthographic patterns of English; (2) retaining chunks of language of different lengths in short term memory; (3) processing writing at an efficient rate of speed to suit the purpose; (4) recognising a core of words, and interpret word order patterns and their significance; (5) recognising grammatical word classes (nouns, verb etc.) systems (e.g. tense, agreement, pluralisation), patterns, rules, and elliptical forms; (6) recognising that a particular meaning may be expressed in different grammatical forms; and (7) recognising cohesive devices in written discourse and their role in signaling the relationship between and among clauses. Further, Brown identifies seven macroskills of reading: (1) recognising the rhetorical forms of written discourse and their significance for interpretation; (2) recognising the communicative functions of written texts, according to form and purpose; (3) inferring context that is not explicit by using background knowledge; (4) from described events, ideas, etc., inferring links and connections between events, deducing

causes and effects, and detecting such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification; (5) distinguishing between literal and implied meanings; (6) detecting culturally specific references and interpret them in a context of the appropriate cultural schemata; and (7) developing and using a battery of reading strategies such as scanning and skimming, detecting discourse markers, guessing the meaning of words from context, and activating schemata for the interpretation of texts.

Having proficient reading comprehension skill is required for EFL learners as it increases the effectiveness of reading and helps not only academic, but also professional life. In order to master reading comprehension skill, efficient strategy to increase the skill should be chosen carefully, and this needs to consider the reading comprehension profile of the learners. That is why, reading assessment should be carried out to identify the profile. Besides, due to its crucial role, the skill is mostly assessed in the process of university admission and occupational assessments. For this reason, many institutions use standardized test, such as IELTS, the International English Testing System, to assess reading comprehension profile of the candidates or participants. IELTS is designed to test the language skill of applicants who need to study or work in environment that use English for communication (IELTS 2015). Liao (2019) mentioned there are three construct components assessed in IELTS reading test:

1. Reading for main idea

The task types for this component are matching headings and multiple choice.

2. Reading for details

The task types of this component are matching information, matching features, sentence completion, matching sentence endings, summary completion, notes completion, table completion flow-chart completion, diagram label completion, short-answer questions, true/false/not given and multiple choice.

3. Identifying writer's opinion or ideas

The task types for this component are true/false/not given and multiple choice.

## Methodology

This is a descriptive research with mixed method design. Descriptive research utilises some techniques to collect and analyse data to describe naturally occurring phenomena without experimental manipulation (Selling and Shohami, 1989). The focus of this research is to describe EFL learners' reading comprehension. To collect and analyse the data, the researcher employed mixed method design. This method combines qualitative and quantitative approach to collect and analyze data (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007). The study was conducted in Universitas Nasional Karangturi involving first-semester students of English Education Department in the Academic Year of 2020/2021. There were only 8 (eight) students in this semester so that the researcher did not need to conduct sampling to take sample. The researcher took all of the students as the participants of this research.

This research was carried out to answer the following questions:

1. What is the initial reading comprehension profile of EFL learners according to IELT and CEFR framework?
2. What is the initial reading comprehension profile of EFL learners according to the four level of reading comprehension?

To answer the question, the researcher collected the data of the research. The data were the scores of the students' reading test. The instrument used to collect the data was reading test taken from Cambridge IELTS 14 Academic. The data collected showed the scores the students achieved in the reading section. After getting the data, the researcher determined and described the students' levels of English. The guideline used to describe the students' performance was the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). After collecting and describing the data, the scores of the students' comprehension were then classified into very good, good, average, poor, and very poor. After that, the researcher analysed the performance of the students on each component of IELTS reading test according to Liao (2019): reading for main ideas, reading for details, and identifying writer's opinions or ideas.

## Findings and Discussion

The researcher conducted reading test taken from Cambridge IELTS 14 Academic to know the students' reading comprehension. The test assessed the students' ability to read for main ideas, read for details and identify writer's opinion or ideas. The task types of the test were matching headings, multiple choice, matching information, sentence completion, true/false/not given, notes completion and summary completion.

The result of students' reading comprehension test is presented in table 1.

Table 1. The student's band score of IELTS Academic Reading test

Participant	Score/40	IELTS Band Score	Score/100
Student 1	5	2.5	12.5
Student 2	6	3	15
Student 3	6	3	15
Student 4	7	3	17.5
Student 5	9	5	22.5
Student 6	17	5.5	42.5
Student 7	21	6	52.5
Student 8	28	6.5	70
<b>Mean</b>		<b>4.31</b>	<b>30.94</b>

The data shows that the student's highest band score is 6.5 and the lowest is 2.5, while the average band score is 4.31, which is then rounded down to 4. Each IELTS band score reflects different level of English users. The interpretation of English levels of the students is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The IELTS scores and description of the students' levels based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Little, 2018)

Category	English Level	IELTS Band Score	Description	Number of students	Percent (%)
Proficient user	C2	9	Can understand and interpret critically virtually all forms of the written language including abstract, structurally complex, or highly colloquial literary and non-literary writings	0	0

			Can understand a wide range of long and complex texts, appreciating subtle distinctions of style and implicit as well as explicit meaning.		
	C1	8 7.5 7	Can understand in detail lengthy, complex texts, whether or not they relate to his/her own area of speciality, provided he/she can reread difficult sections.	0	0
Independent user	B2	6.5 6 5.5	Can read with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively. Has a broad active reading vocabulary, but may experience some difficulty with low-frequency idioms.	3	37.5
	B1	5 4.5 4	Can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to his/her field and interest with a satisfactory level of comprehension.	1	15.5
Basic user	A2	3.5 3 2.5	Can understand short, simple texts on familiar matters of a concrete type which consist of high frequency everyday or job-related language	4	50
			Can understand short, simple texts containing the highest frequency vocabulary, including a proportion of shared international vocabulary items.		
	A1		Can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, words and basic phrases and rereading as required.		

Based on the data in Table 2, it can be seen that the majority of the students are categorised as basic users since 50% of all the students are at the A2 level of English. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the students at this level are able to comprehend simple texts about issues that are familiar with language related to everyday activities with high-frequency words. In general, people in this category can understand expressions in most relevant areas such as personal and family information. Besides, they can communicate about familiar matters and describe them in simple

terms. Furthermore, 50% of the students are independent users: 15.5% of the students are at the B1 and 37.5% are at the B2 English level. The students at B1 level are able to understand simple texts related to their field and interest with a satisfactory level of comprehension. People at this level can understand the main ideas of texts related to matters they usually deal with in work, school, etc. They can also make texts which are familiar or of personal interests. Besides, they can describe events and give explanation and reason for opinions. Moreover, 37.5% of the students are at the B2 level. They can read different text types and use reference source selectively. They have a large number of reading vocabulary as well, but may find some difficulty in understanding low-frequency expressions. People at B2 level of English can understand main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract subjects in their fields of specialisation, create and elaborate texts on a wide range of subjects and socialise with native speakers.

After being used to identify and describe the English levels of the students, the scores of the students' comprehension are then classified into very good, good, average, poor, and very poor. The distribution of the scores can be see in Table 3.

Table 3. The score distribution of reading comprehension

<b>Classification of students' comprehension</b>	<b>Score interval</b>	<b>Number of students</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Very good	80-100	0	0
Good	70-79	1	12.5
Average	60-69	0	0
Poor	50-59	1	12.5
Very poor	0-49	6	75
Total		8	100

It can be seen from Table 3 that 12.5% of the students has good reading comprehension, 12.5% has poor reading comprehension, and 75% have very poor reading comprehension. This shows that the first-semester students of English Education Department of Universitas Nasional Karangturi have very poor reading comprehension. The fact that there are 7 students who got below-average score and only 1 student who got good score shows that the students' ability to comprehend written text is low.

Further, after classifying the score distribution, the researcher analysed the performance of the students on each component of IELTS reading test according to Liao (2019): reading for main ideas, reading for details, and identifying writer's opinions or ideas. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' performance on the component of IELTS reading test

<b>Construct component of IELTS reading test</b>	<b>Students' Performance (%)</b>
Reading for main ideas	26
Reading for details	33.8
Identifying writer's opinions or ideas	22

Table 4 shows the students' performance on each component in IELTS reading test. The students' highest performance is on reading for details (33.8%), followed by reading for main ideas (26%) and identifying writer's opinion or ideas (22%).

Reading comprehension levels are categorised into literal, inferential, critical and creative levels. The result showing that identifying writer's opinions or ideas got the lowest score indicates that the students experienced difficulty in understanding the writer's tone, purpose and attitude. The students' ability to read for main ideas got low score as well. It means that inferring or determining deeper meaning not explicitly stated is an issue for the students. This fact reflects the level of the students' reading comprehension. The students in this study are not at the higher level of reading comprehension since they lack ability to link new knowledge relationships with prior knowledge, draw inferences and link coherent ideas as the skills of higher reading comprehension (Clarke, Truelove, Hulme, Snowling, & Chesher, 2014). This finding is in line with Perin's idea (2013) that it is difficult for many students to identify main ideas in text, a global idea in text and make summary of text. Table 4 also shows that the highest score of the students' performance is in the ability to read for details (33.8%). This component requires students' skill to find ideas that are explicitly stated and recognise information presented in the text. In other words, the students need to understand basic facts. This involves comprehension of literal meaning of the text.

Reading is an active process since the reader creates meaning from a written text. When reading, readers need to be actively involved in the text and know the methods they use to comprehend the reading materials. However, the students' reading comprehension can be developed by applying appropriate reading strategy; and choosing effective reading strategy should consider students' reading comprehension profile. That is why, understanding the level of students' reading comprehension is important.

## Conclusion

The objective of the study is to find out the initial profile of EFL Learners' reading comprehension. The result of the research shows that most of the first-semester students of English Education Department of Universitas Nasional Karangturi are at A2 level of English based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). At this level, the students can understand short, simple texts on familiar matters of a concrete type which consist of high frequency everyday or job-related language and understand short, simple texts containing the highest frequency vocabulary, including a proportion of shared international vocabulary items. The distribution of the score got by the students also reflects that the students have very poor reading comprehension. Furthermore, based on the students' performance on each construct component in IELTS Academic Reading test, the highest performance the students have is on reading for details, followed by reading for main ideas and identifying writer's opinion. This indicates that the students are at the lower level of reading comprehension, that is literal level. This level needs to be improved since the students' performance is 33.8%. Better students' reading comprehension level can be developed by applying appropriate reading strategy. That is why, choosing effective strategy in teaching reading should be carefully chosen; and EFL learners' profile of reading comprehension must be considered to decide the strategy to use.

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